INDIA'S BANDIT QUEEN

THE TRUE STORY OF PHOOLAN DEVI

BY MALA SEN

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India's Bandit Queen

MALA SEN

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The True Story of Phoolan Devi

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In memory of

HUEY P. NEWTON

(1942–1989)

and my father,

LT. GEN. "BOGEY" SEN

(1910–1981)

". . . It is karma that brings joy or sorrow,
Willing or unwilling, we live by our karma.
Observe the potter shaping his pots:
Some break on the wheel,
Some crack after removal from the wheel,
Some spoil when wet, some when dry,
Some burst while being fired,
Some after removal from the kiln,
Some shatter in use . . .
So some of us die in the womb,
Some immediately after birth,
Some a day later,
Some a fortnight later, some a month,
Some after one year, some after two,
Some in youth, some in middle age, some old.
Their karma determines it all.
This is the way the world is –
So what is the point of grieving?
Swimmers dive,
then emerge from the water;
So creatures sink into,
and emerge from the stream of life.'

[From The Eleventh Book:
The Women, *The Mahabharata of Vyasa*]

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There are a few I wish to thank but cannot for reasons of their security. In this context, some names in the book have been changed. Several people in positions of authority, both in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, have also been extremely helpful. I hesitate to name them because I am aware that those in government jobs are always a prey to politics.

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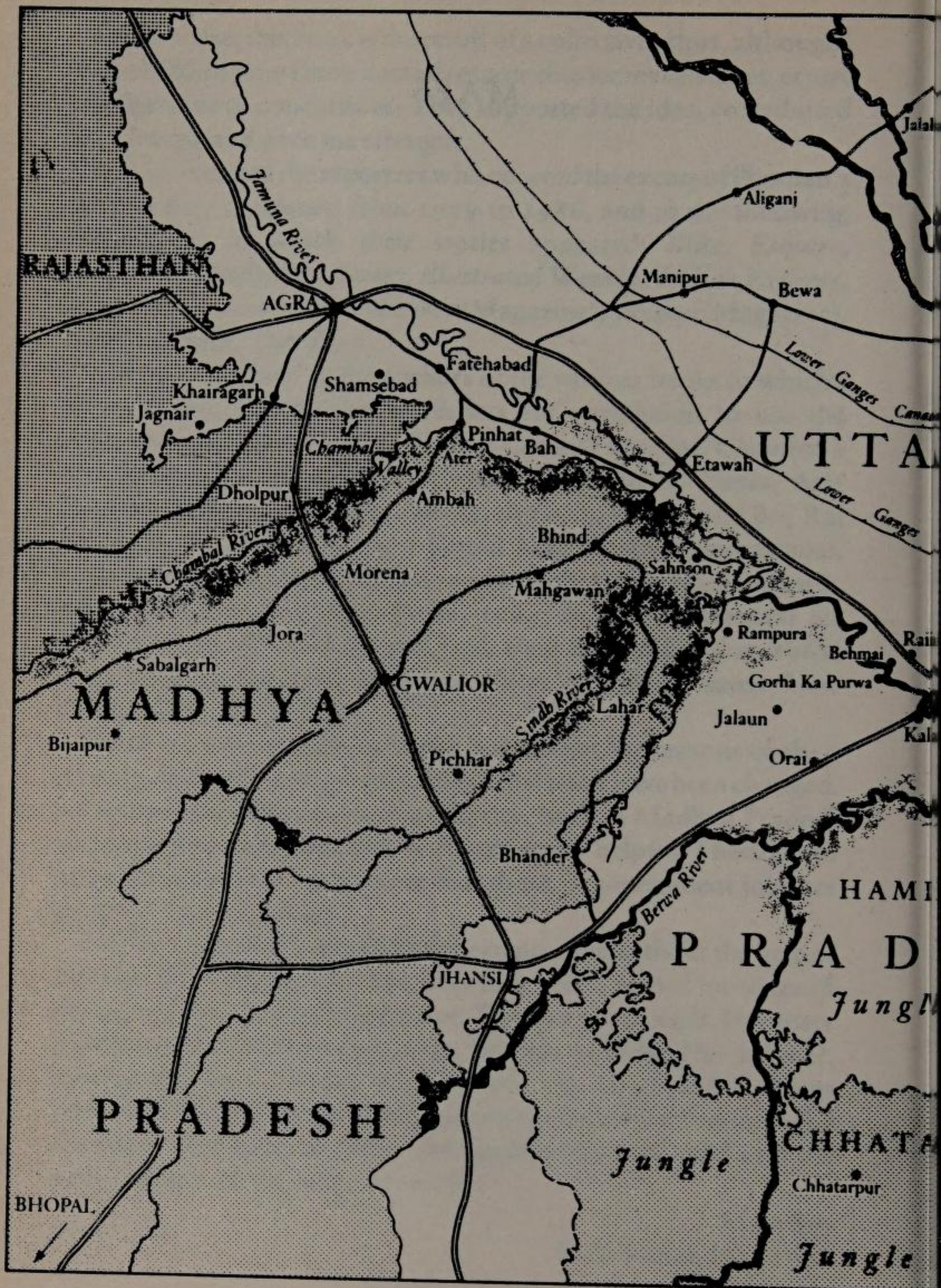
Mala Sen
Kodaikanal, June 1991

MAPS


RAJASTHAN
Jamuna River
AGRA
Aliganj
Manipur
Bewa
Lower Ganges Canal
Fatehabad
Shamsebad
Khairagarh
Jagnair
Chambal Valley
Pinhat
Bah
Ater
Etawah
UTTA
Lower Ganges
Dholpur
Ambah
Bhind
Chambal River
Morena
Sahnson
Mahgawan
Rampura
Behmai
Jora
Sabalgarh
GWALIOR
MADHYA
Gorha Ka Purwa
Sindh River
Lahar
Jalaun
Bijaipur
Pichhar
Orai
Bhander
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Chhatarpur
BHOPAL
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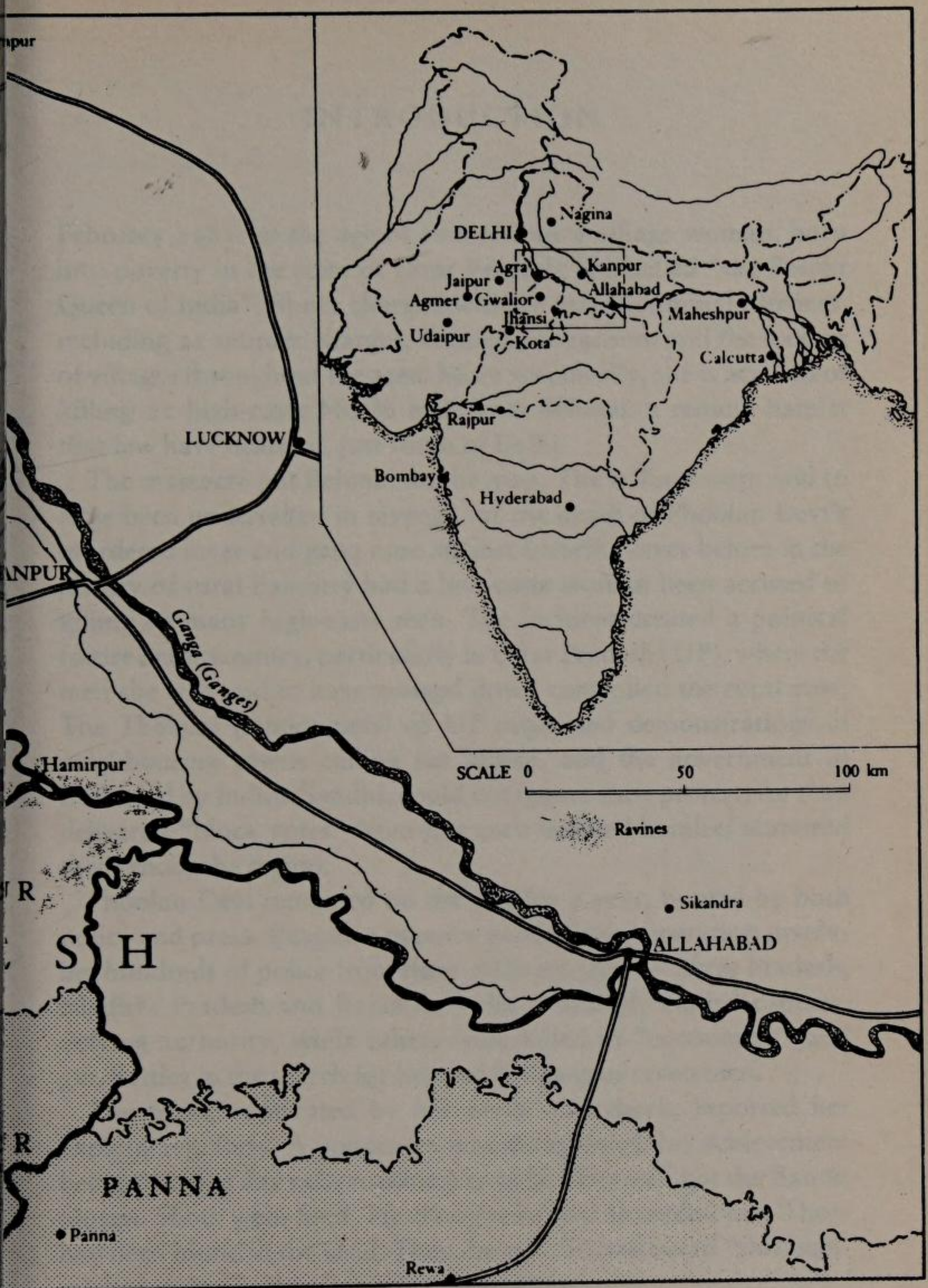
DELHI
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Agra
Kanpur
Jaipur
Allahabad
Agmer
Gwalior
Jhansi
Maheshpur
Udaipur
Kota
Calcutta
Rajpur
Bombay
Hyderabad
LUCKNOW
Ganga (Ganges)
Hamirpur
SCALE 0 50 100 km
Ravines
Sikandra
ALLAHABAD
PANNA
Panna
Rewa

INTRODUCTION

February 1981: at the age of twenty-four a village woman, born into poverty in the state of Uttar Pradesh, is labelled "the Bandit Queen of India". She is charged with 48 major criminal offences, including 22 murder charges, kidnaps-for-ransom and the looting of villages throughout the area. More specifically, she is accused of killing 22 high-caste Hindu men from Behmai, a remote hamlet that few have heard of, just south of Delhi.

The massacre put Behmai on the map. The killings were said to have been undertaken in revenge for the death of Phoolan Devi's murdered lover and gang rape against herself. Never before in the history of rural banditry had a low-caste woman been accused of killing so many high-caste men. The incident created a political furore in the country, particularly in Uttar Pradesh (UP), where the men she was said to have gunned down controlled the rural vote. The Thakurs (landowners) of UP organized demonstrations in neighbouring towns calling for justice, and the government in Delhi, led by Indira Gandhi, could not ignore their protest, for they delivered "block votes" from just such isolated hamlets scattered throughout the region.

Phoolan Devi remained on the run for a year, hunted by both police and press. Despite a massive paramilitary operation involving hundreds of police from three different states – Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajastan – she constantly eluded capture, defying authority, while others were killed in "encounters" and gun battles in the search for her and her gang of seven men.

The press, captivated by her nerve and cheek, reported her exploits regularly. A policeman was interviewed, his achievement being that one day on a routine patrol he "almost" got the Bandit Queen. Shots were fired. He thought he had wounded her. There had been blood in the sand. Then, he said, he had heard "this high-pitched, metallic, female voice taunting them:

"*Himat na tho chudiya le jao. Goliyan na ho tho goliyan le jao.*" (If you don't have guts, take my bangles. If you don't have balls, take my bullets.)

The article, published in *Sunday*, a mainstream English-language news magazine based in Calcutta, had made the police look foolish and enhanced the legend steadily growing around Phoolan Devi. For political reasons, the situation could not be allowed to continue. Local elections were imminent and Mrs Gandhi needed to pacify the outraged Thakurs of Uttar Pradesh. A senior policeman, the Superintendent of Police (SP) for Bhind, told the Prime Minister that too many police lives had already been lost in futile attempts to capture Phoolan Devi. The only way to put an end to the embarrassing saga was to persuade her to surrender, as dacoit (armed bandit) gangs had been persuaded to do in the past – in 1960 and in 1972 – when Gandhian politicians negotiated terms with them on behalf of the central government. The Prime Minister having agreed that he pursue this option, it took Rajendra Chaturvedi more than two years to set up a meeting with Phoolan Devi, who trusted neither police nor state.

Before she agreed to surrender, Phoolan Devi made a deal in the form of a verbal agreement with Indira Gandhi's government represented by Rajendra Chaturvedi, with whom she had been negotiating for several months. Her surrender terms included the following conditions: that neither she nor members of her gang would be hanged; that the gang would not be extradited to Uttar Pradesh; that they would be allowed to live together in jail; that they would be given two proper meals a day; that her family would be rehoused in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh; that her goat and her cow would be brought to Gwalior with the family; and that she and the members of her gang would be released after eight years.

The history of rural banditry in the Chambal Valley dates back to the twelfth century when Raja Anangpal Tomar, driven out of Delhi by his cousin Prithviraj Chauhan, took refuge in the ravines just south of Agra. From here he made repeated attacks, without much success, on his cousin and on Delhi. Ever since that time this

terrain has been known as baghi – or rebel – territory. Later, in the sixteenth century, when the Moghuls took control of Delhi, the region served as a buffer zone between Muslim powers in the north and Hindu kingdoms of the south. Still later, when the East India Company entered the fray, opening up trade routes that skirted these forests and ravines, travellers were constantly killed and robbed by gangs of Thugs. As a consequence, in 1826, the British appointed Captain William Sleeman to tackle the problem.

In 1840 Sleeman said, as recorded in Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Tuker's book *The Yellow Scarf*: ". . . the evil has been contained." Not so. In 1857, one year after Sleeman's death at sea on his way back to England, several rebel gangs joined the Rani of Jhansi (Queen of Jhansi) in her fight for independence from colonial rule – the Indian Mutiny, as the British call the first War of Independence. Gwalior Central Jail, where Phoolan Devi is held today, overlooks the battlefields on which the legendary "Jhansi ki Rani" was killed by an unknown British soldier, temporarily quelling the revolt against the Empire. She was dressed like a man. Riding a horse, she was riddled by bullets while in the saddle, and is now part of the legend of the Chambal Valley.

Sleeman, like Kipling, understood the nuances of Indian culture, which are deeply rooted in religion, folklore and myth, and he had this to say about the legendary origins of Thugs, who then controlled the ravines and forests of the valley:

Kali, the goddess who presided over Thuggee, was worshipped also under the names of Bhowani and Devi. She was the wife of Mahadeo, or Siva, and first appeared on earth on the banks of the Hooghli, at a spot afterwards called, in memory of the event, Kali Ghat, now Calcutta. Here stands her most honoured temple, and here is still celebrated with the most solemn rites her chief festival, the Durga Puja. Those who address her with the greatest reverence style her Kankali, or the "man-eater", representing her as quaffing huge draughts of blood from men and demons. When alone, she is depicted as black and hideous

of aspect: but in company with her husband she is ever fair and beautiful. Once on a time the world was infested by a monstrous demon named Rukt Bij-dana, who devoured mankind as fast as they were created. So gigantic was his stature that the deepest pools of the ocean reached no higher than his waist. This horrid prodigy Kali cut in twain with her resistless sword, but from every drop of blood that fell to the ground there sprang a new demon. For some time she went on destroying them, till the hellish brood multiplied so fast that she waxed hot and weary with her endless task. So she paused for a while, and from the sweat brushed off one of her arms, she created two men, to whom she gave a *rumal* or handkerchief, and commanded them to strangle the demons. When they had slain them all, they offered to return the *rumal*, but the goddess bade them keep it and transmit it to their posterity, with the injunction to destroy all men who were not of their kindred.

The sandy ridges and ravines of the area have bred both rebellion and religion for hundreds of years. The valley takes its name from the Chambal River, which is known locally as the River of Revenge. It flows eastwards from its source in Rajastan, through Madhya Pradesh into Uttar Pradesh, where it joins the Jamuna. Two hundred miles downstream it meets the Ganges at Allahabad. It runs through three administrative states of the Indian subcontinent, cutting through the breast of the country. Each river has a legend of its own. The Yamuna and Ganga, to use their old Indian names, are considered to be sacred. Local people drink these waters when called upon to testify to "truth", much in the way that people place their hands on the Bible before taking the oath in British courtrooms.

The Chambal, villagers say, was cursed by Draupadi, common wife to the five Pandava brothers in the ancient Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. The story goes that the Pandavas, in a dice game with their cousins who were also their rivals, steadily gambled away their kingdom and, eventually, their wife. Draupadi had

cursed the river so that generations to come would remember her vengeance. It is said that if you drink the waters of this river you are changed for ever, that you have absorbed the spirit of revenge.

On either side of the river lie the badlands of central India, some 8000 square kilometres of bandit country, inhabited by people who have, for centuries, been contemptuous of the state but remain fearful of God.

The land yields little. Erosion is severe. Each year thousands of hectares, nearly 20,000 acres, are lost to the ravines that scar this wasteland. Entire villages have been abandoned because of it; for with no land left to cultivate, people move away in search of another patch from which to earn some kind of living. All they leave behind are streaks of vermilion on a rock or a dried-up well. In summer, vicious winds sweep the plains, shifting sand in every direction. During the monsoon season, torrential rains flood low-lying villages, washing away the topsoil. Earth that was once arable falls into the river. The ravines expand and only thorny shrubs survive.

In this desolate landscape of sand and thorn, people have for generations settled their own scores, taken their own badla – revenge – killing and maiming in the name of God and justice. Phoolan Devi is a product of this cruel and harsh environment.

Unable to read or write herself, she has dictated her story to a variety of people who can put pen to paper. I refer to these writings as her prison diaries. In addition I have communicated with her in other ways – by letter, by chance meeting – over a period of three to four years. I have travelled with her mother, her brother and her sisters to their ancestral ravine village, to the villages of relatives, in an attempt to understand the terrain in which she lived and operated. Her personal story, extraordinary as it is, reflects many aspects of life as experienced by thousands of women in rural India who continue to strive against a feudal order that persists in a "modern" society, a society in which the peasantry collides with capitalist arrangements, markets and technology. It is a social system where those who till the soil often work not for wages but for sacks of grain.

Phoolan's family owned a small patch of wasteland that provided them with cheap grain through the year, but not much else. Below them were the landless, who worked either as sharecroppers (buying the privilege of working someone else's land in return for the major proportion of their annual crop) or bonded labourers who worked just to stay alive, trapped by the debts of their ancestors. Devidin, Phoolan Devi's father, lived on the edge of two categories. He had land but was forced to work as a sharecropper, as a paid hand, for farmers wealthier than himself. Directly beneath this precarious, borderline existence lay the abyss of human degradation and despair.

Although there have been other women bandits who made their mark on the history of the Chambal Valley, none of them have lived to speak of the experience. All, without exception, were killed in gun battles triggered by inter-gang rivalries or encounters with the police. Phoolan Devi is the sole survivor.

Her surrender, when it came, had no precedent in terms of the phenomenal emotion it engendered among ordinary people.

When asked by a journalist at a press conference, soon after she laid down her arms, what she wanted out of life, Phoolan Devi is reported to have said:

"If I had money, I would build a house with rooms as large as the hall of this prison. But I know this is all a dream. If any woman were to go through my experience, then she too would not be able to think of a normal life. What do I know, except cutting grass and using a rifle?"

1

Eve of Surrender

THE NIGHT BEFORE she surrendered, Phoolan Devi contracted a sudden high fever. It was February 1983. Recalling that night, she said, "I was very angry and disturbed and had not eaten for three days. I cursed anyone who came before me and I would throw any object within my reach. My extreme anger coloured my vision and I could not see reason. Worried about my attitude, the Superintendent of Police postponed the date of the surrender ceremony from 10 February to 12 February. He also got Man Singh's help to take my rifle away from me, saying I was dangerous in this state of mind. By now I was in pretty poor shape and in a confused, uncertain state of mind. Everyone else seemed to be preparing for Bhind."

Bhind, a small dusty market town in Madhya Pradesh, had been chosen as the venue for the ceremony at Phoolan Devi's insistence. The Superintendent of Police there, Rajendra Chaturvedi, was the only policeman – or for that matter the only "official" – she trusted. It was through him that she had negotiated various terms and conditions with Indira Gandhi's government, before agreeing to lay down her arms. Her last demand had been that the ceremony take place in Bhind and that pictures of the goddess Durga and Mahatma Gandhi be placed on the stage so that, in spirit, she would be surrendering to them and not to the police or the state. The Prime Minister, when consulted on this matter in her office in Delhi, had responded, "What does it matter where she surrenders?" So, Bhind it was, 40 kilometres away from the village of Inguie, where the police had requisitioned a Rest House that belonged to the Irrigation Department in order to accommodate the the members of two dacoit gangs, members of their families and the

press, who were eager to file stories before the official event took place.

At the Rest House, after many hours of walking, Phoolan Devi fluctuated between extremes of emotion. Tears of despair and rage had followed streams of abuse. Chaturvedi admitted, when I interviewed him later, that he had been extremely nervous and worried at the time. The arrangements he had made for the next day could not be altered. The Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Arjun Singh, was to arrive at 9 a.m. from Delhi by helicopter, as Bhind was not connected to any city by either train or plane. Only jeeps, trucks and bullock carts travelled these bumpy, dusty roads. That meant, he had calculated, they would have to leave the Rest House by 6 a.m. If anything went wrong, if the Chief Minister were embarrassed in any way, there would be serious political repercussions and his entire career would be affected.

He had been well aware of that, he said, as he looked at Phoolan Devi lying face down on the bed, sobbing uncontrollably like a child, hands clenched in fists of rage. Only a few minutes earlier she had been screaming at him, clutching her rifle in defiance, "You think I'm going to surrender tomorrow? Well, that's one idea you can stuff up your arse." Then she had paced the floor, flung the weapon on the bed and asked him boldly, "How much money are *you* making out of this?"

Chaturvedi told me he had become accustomed to such scenes but he also knew that Phoolan Devi's reactions, following each such confrontation, could not be anticipated. "She is the most unpredictable woman I have ever met – in my entire life!" he added, with a laugh that was almost affectionate.

At the time, he had remained as patient and tolerant as he knew how, not rising from the chair in which he sat. "I'm not doing this for money," he had responded. "You know that – surely you *must* know that by now. What were the options? Think about it. A dog's death in the ravines? To be arrested by the UP police or shot dead in an encounter? To be tried by a court and hanged?"

At first Phoolan Devi had listened to him in silence, then she had shouted back, "What do people like you care? What's it to you

anyway – whether you have me dead or alive? You *have* me! Trapped like a rat! Don't you? You're all the same. Bastards! All of you. The paperwallahs outside, the photowallahs – *all* of you."

Chaturvedi had reminded her that he had persuaded the government to rehabilitate her family in Madhya Pradesh and provide them with land near Gwalior. That hadn't been easy. "Now at least they'll be safe," he had assured her. "They'll be able to visit you as often as you like. Every day if you want," he said in an attempt to calm her down.

"Visits! Oh, yes, there are many people out there who have come to *visit*, but let me tell you one thing, I'm not in a cage yet!" Then, picking up objects close at hand, she had hurled them across the room: a stainless-steel tumbler, a brass ashtray that clattered across the floor, startling the sentry outside, who rushed into the room rifle in hand. Chaturvedi had dismissed him with a wave of his hand, telling him to shut the door. At this point Phoolan Devi had flung herself on top of her rifle, burying her face in the pillow, and wept with an intensity that had alarmed the officer.

In February 1988, five years after the event, Rajendra Chaturvedi had been promoted to Commandant of the Special Armed Force (SAF) and was posted in Rewa, the headquarters of this paramilitary squad in north-eastern Madhya Pradesh, where I met him on the lawns of the Police Mess. We sat in the shade of an elegant garden umbrella, drinking beer, as he recalled the events of that night in the Irrigation Rest House of Inguie.

Continuing his story, he said, "I got up from that chair and touched the back of her head – I was trying to reassure her, you see – I told her not to worry so much. I said, 'Trust me.' Then I left the room and tried to reassure the bewildered sentry, who had never witnessed anything like this in his life! I said something like: 'God spare me from women,' which seemed to make him relax. I told him that the same rules as before applied. All members of Phoolan's gang and members of her family were to be allowed access to her but not the press. Ghanshyam, too – the

other gang leader who had also agreed to surrender the next day. Baba Ghanshyam he called himself and always liked to give the impression that he was in communication with God!"

Chaturvedi had gone outside in search of Man Singh, Phoolan Devi's lover and co-leader of her gang. The atmosphere in the grounds surrounding the Rest House was as if a carnival were about to begin. Camp fires had been lit for heat and light, people sat in groups, baghis (rebels) and their relatives, journalists and interpreters from far-flung corners of the country and the globe. Stories were being told, of bravery, oppression, honour, sorrow and comedy. There was much laughter in the air – the kind of high-pitched, unrealistic emotion that is evoked in moments of heightened tension, in situations charged with a mixture of conflicting feelings – uncertainty and pride, fear and relief – all thrown up in the confusion of a single night. Photographers wandered around, their flashlights like fireworks, sporadic interruptions to the intensity of talk. "It was quite a tamasha!" said Chaturvedi, smiling at the memory.

Ghanshyam had been there, dressed in a crisp, starched, khaki police uniform garlanded with flowers and prayer beads, a red *tilak* streaked across his forehead, eyes closed, legs crossed in the yogic posture of meditation. Next to him, his younger brother, Karan Singh, fondled an automatic sten gun as they posed for photographers. "Enjoying their moment of glory!" Chaturvedi said. He was looking for Man Singh. Ghanshyam's gang was just another he had persuaded, with Phoolan Devi's help, to surrender. The Chambal Valley would now be free of dacoits – for a while at any rate. Phoolan Devi's gang was the prize. She would be the last important gang leader to surrender and was the one who had caused the most political chaos. If all went well the next day the government would be pleased and all his efforts, all those months of anxiety, would not have been in vain. Still, he was worried. He had to find Man Singh and win him over to his side. He had to persuade him to calm Phoolan Devi, so that they could leave for Bhind the next morning as planned.

*

Phoolan Devi also remembers that night. She heard the door shut as Chaturvedi left the room. Now alone, with time for her own thoughts, she began to pull herself together. She switched off the light and lay flat on her back, pushing the rifle aside for comfort. She heard the clatter of a typewriter in another room. The police were drawing up a list of weapons being surrendered. She had already counted her own bullets: 25 in the gunbelt plus one in the rifle – 26 in all. Man Singh was dealing with the rest.

The flickering light from the camp fires gave warmth to the atmosphere of the room, but the blue flashes from the cameras outside hurt her eyes. From that moment on, she says, she began to hate all photographers. Through the half-open window she began to recognize voices. That of her mother, Moola, replying to questions of all sorts. The voices of journalists, some speaking in foreign languages through interpreters. She lay still to listen.

"Was she vicious as a child?"

"Does she really worship Kali?"

"How many lovers has she had?"

"Why does she hate Thakurs?"

"Was she really gang-raped by the Thakurs of Behmai?"

Her mother's voice was steady, though slow and deliberate as if each word were measured, as she replied to some questions and ignored others. "She's had a hard life," she responded. "Poverty and desperation lead to many things. Who can judge her except Durga Mata? Don't blame her for what she's done, or is supposed to have done – it is not her fault, it was her fate. The One Above knows . . ."

Phoolan could hear her youngest sister, Munni, then nine years old, saying with the same calm of her mother: "No, she doesn't want to see anyone or have her picture taken. You see, she still has her rifle and is wondering whether to kill herself. She doesn't trust the police."

Phoolan Devi remembers feeling grateful to them both and covering her eyes with her shawl as the flashguns continued to light up the wall opposite.

Her mind began to drift. She thought of Vikram Mallah, the first

man who had encouraged her to laugh, swear and speak her mind without inhibition . . . Now, on the eve of her surrender, she felt she was calling on his spirit for strength. She tried to remember his physical presence, particularly his mocking, youthful eyes, which always seemed full of humour; his jet-black hair, soft to the touch; his hands, amazingly steady when he held a rifle, whatever the circumstance.

"It worked!" she told me: recalling his presence, and memories of their time together, had made her breathe steadily as she began to relax. It was a brief and fleeting respite. Soon, other memories and images took over. Suddenly, she thought of the only photograph she possessed of Vikram Mallah: a police shot of his dead body riddled with bullets. She remembered how she had felt that night. She remembered the bullet wounds. How many times had they shot him? She wasn't sure. She had tried to embrace him one last time but her captors had dragged her away. His body, slumped in the tangle of bedding they had shared, had looked so vulnerable in death. She had felt the numbness of terror and despair spreading through her veins, in the same way as she was beginning to feel once again. Her mind took another twist and she began to picture bullet wounds, trying to count how many there were. By now Phoolan Devi was in a cold sweat, aware of all that surrounded her, mixing memory with reality as she drifted into an exhausted sleep.

In the chill of dawn she had struggled to remember the events of the night before. Man Singh lay asleep in the bed next to her, fully dressed in his new khaki uniform, his hand on his rifle out of habit. The uniform reminded her of the police tailor who had come to measure her. She'd attacked him for reasons she could not fully understand herself, shouting, "If I surrender at all it will be in my own clothes."

Chaturvedi had been there, trying to bring some calm to the situation. "But it's what you wanted – what you *asked* for. A new police uniform and new shoes. I've given you the shoes."

She couldn't remember her response as she looked at the running-shoes that lay in different corners of the room, flung there in fits of rage the night before.

Man Singh, as if in support of her hostility to the tailor, had also made a fuss. She had heard him raising his voice from the next room: "What's *this*? I said I wanted long sleeves."

Chaturvedi had instructed the tailor to change the sleeves.

"Change the whole sleeve," Man Singh had shouted back, "I don't want a join."

The sun was about to rise as Phoolan Devi woke Man Singh, having decided that all other options had run out. The surrender ceremony could not be avoided or postponed. Chaturvedi was right. Nothing else was possible. Two buses were waiting in the compound of the Rest House, together with a fleet of police jeeps that were to escort them to Bhind. She tucked her jumper into her jeans for warmth, put on her new shoes and picked up her red shawl. Man Singh was rinsing his mouth out and splashing his face with cold water in the adjoining bathroom, unimpressed by the comparative luxury of their surroundings, despite years of sleeping rough in the ravines. These things didn't seem to matter to him, whereas Phoolan always examined anything that was new to her with the curiosity of a child.

"Where are the others?" she asked, adjusting the bandanna on her head. Her entire family was there. Chaturvedi had seen to that.

"Outside," Man Singh replied. "They put up tents."

"And my rifle?"

"Under the bed."

It was then that she remembered his gentle touch and his worried face as he had taken the rifle from her side the night before, and she went to embrace him. "This is it then," she said, retrieving her .303 Mauser and examining it to make sure it was still loaded. He nodded.

As Phoolan Devi and Man Singh were about to enter the bus with members of their gang and her family, a photographer was positioning himself for a shot. Phoolan Devi flew at him, snatching at his camera. Man Singh took it from him and was trying to remove the film when Chaturvedi rushed to the man's rescue, returning the camera to him saying, "Don't cause any more

confusion. Keep out of this." The photographer fled, grateful that his camera had not been smashed to pieces by this crazy man with long tangled hair and eyes that looked as if they could kill.

Later, from prison, Phoolan Devi recalled: "It was 6 a.m. when we started from there. I asked the ticket inspector sitting next to me to stop the bus, since I wanted to speak to the SP. Chaturvedi was in the other bus with Baba Ghanshyam's gang. The bus came to a halt and the SP came out to meet me. He placed his hand over my head and asked me to be patient and not to worry. I then said that I would only go along with them if my brother, Shiv Narain, was given a government job. He was about fourteen at the time. I said, 'If you don't agree I will kill myself.' So the SP agreed, called my brother out of the bus, put his name in his diary and said he had been admitted into the Madhya Pradesh police force as a cadet. After that we got back into the bus and all the way to Bhind he tried to explain things to me to calm me down. When we reached Bhind we stopped at some college parade ground and I noticed a stage had been constructed at one end. I saw a crowd of people and was asked to change my clothes. We heard the sound of a helicopter overhead and there were cries of 'CM Sahib! CM Sahib!' I rushed to Chaturvedi and said, 'So, you've lied to me. You said I would surrender to the Mukhya Mantri, Arjun Singh, not to any CM Sahib.' He explained that CM meant Chief Minister and was the English way of saying Mukhya Mantri and that the man who had just arrived was Arjun Singh."

At the time of Phoolan Devi's surrender in February 1983 I was working in London. A friend had been sending me press clippings from India, knowing that her story had fascinated me for some time. I wanted to find out more about her but she was thousands of miles away in an Indian prison and I had no funds for such a venture. It took me more than three years but eventually the money to research her story for a documentary film came through.

2

The Road to Gwalior

In August 1986, I found myself in Bhopal, the capital city and administrative centre of Madhya Pradesh. I had come to seek official permission to interview Phoolan Devi in Gwalior Central Jail, an overnight train journey away to the north, towards Delhi.

It had been a discouraging day. The Chief Minister had changed. Arjun Singh, to whom Phoolan Devi had surrendered, had been replaced by Moti Lal Vora, who belonged to the same Congress Party that still ruled the country, but his allegiance was to another faction within it. His predecessor was his political rival. The Prime Minister in Delhi had also changed: Indira Gandhi had been assassinated and her son Rajiv had taken over. Different forces were at play. The whole political scenario had altered and I was not sure I understood it.

The Chief Minister was diplomatic but unsympathetic to my application to interview the dacoits awaiting trial in Gwalior jail. Grim, unsmiling, terse, he wanted to know my intentions as he concentrated on signing papers from various files, piled high on his desk. I explained that I was a freelance researcher, that there was nothing "political" in my approach; I merely wanted to understand the nature of such people and to record some details about the lives they had led. He was unimpressed. I felt he was about to deny me permission, but he said he would look into the matter. I thanked him and left. There was not much else I could do or say. After I had waited for hours, getting stiff on a hard wooden bench outside his office, the meeting had lasted less than ten minutes. Many others were waiting to see him, mostly local politicians and businessmen, probably appealing for various favours and contracts.

Outside, sheltering from the sun's blinding blaze, groups of villagers camped under trees scattered about the compound. Security police lounged around listlessly, their khaki uniforms drenched with sweat. The driver of my hired car had fallen asleep under one of the trees – hardly surprising, since temperatures had reached more than 100°F in the shade. I woke him and we returned to the car. It was like climbing into a tin oven. The plastic seats were so hot that he had to find some water and wipe them down with a wet cloth. He wiped the steering-wheel too, which he could barely hold, and told me I was lucky to have met the Minister Sahib. Most of the people squatting in the grounds, he informed me, had been waiting three days or more; they had walked miles from surrounding villages. On the way back to the hotel, past Bhopal's twin lakes, I began to absorb what he was saying and appreciate my "luck". I even felt grateful for that awful wooden bench on which I had waited. At least there had been a fan in the room – blowing hot air that had seemed little comfort at the time, but a fan nevertheless.

At the hotel reception desk I was handed a telegram from Bombay. It read: "PERMISSION TO INTERVIEW PHOOLAN DENIED STOP SHALL I COME TO GWALIOR ANYWAY QUESTION AIR TICKET CONFIRMED STOP". I called my journalist friend in Bombay who works for the *Times of India*. She had interviewed Phoolan Devi at some length shortly after her surrender and had applied to follow up the story in order to introduce me. The jail authorities had refused.

My friend explained: "This makes Phoolan a sort of political prisoner. By rights, by the Indian Constitution, I or any other Indian journalist can petition Gwalior High Court, demanding access to an under-trial prisoner in the public interest." She went on to say that she couldn't do this, because her editor would not approve and she might lose her job if she went ahead without his support.

I said that in that case it was not worth the risk but that I would go to Gwalior anyway to try to make contact with Phoolan's family. I had reached a dead end in Bhopal, so that night I caught a train to Gwalior.

The next morning, drinking coffee in another hotel room, I began to feel despondent, daunted by the task ahead. I was not sure where to begin and my mind was becoming clogged with self-doubt. I spoke the language but did not know the town or anyone in it. I had checked the price of hiring a car or taxi and found it too expensive even to contemplate. I was certain of one thing: meeting Phoolan Devi would take much longer to arrange than I had expected and my money would have to be stretched, if the idea was not to be abandoned altogether. The first thing I needed was transport, so I decided to hire a scooter-rickshaw – a three-wheeled taxi built around the framework of a Lambretta, and less than half the price of a car. After some chaotic bargaining outside the railway station, I finally struck a deal with one of the drivers. He looked somewhat suspicious when the first place I asked to be taken was Gwalior Central Jail, which seemed to me the obvious starting-point.

Driving through the town, peering out of the sides of the scooter-rickshaw, I felt dwarfed, my eyes forced up towards Gwalior Fort, which stands high on a cliff like an ancient monolith, dominating the town and its inhabitants. It dates back to around the fifth century AD and is said to have been founded by a minor chieftain, Suraj Sen, influenced by the hermit Gwalipa, from whom the city gets its name.

Over the following centuries, both Hindus and Muslims have ruled from behind its stone walls, even today partially decorated with mosaic tiles of turquoise blue, green and yellow that catch the sunlight and still glitter, creating an impression of tremendous grandeur, despite the contrast of crumbling walls and weather-beaten, broken rock. From a distance, it looks like a fortress city in its own right. Babar, the first Moghul emperor, conquered it in 1528 and it remained in Muslim hands until the collapse of the Moghul empire, after which it returned to the Scindias, the local Hindu royal family. Just prior to the Moghul conquest, Raja Man Singh, the Rajput ruler of the time, had added to its existing structure and constructed a palace which Babar described as "a pearl among the fortresses of Hind". It is also reputed to have been

the most inaccessible and therefore the most invincible fort in the country.

Below it, vast plains seem to swirl in dust, stretching dramatically for as far as the eye can see. The town's activity, the movement of people and vehicles, give one the feeling of being part of an army of ants, numerous but minuscule in significance. In addition, the scooter-driver told me, the city is considered sacred to the memory of the Rani of Jhansi and Tatya Tope who led the first war of independence against the British in 1857.

At the jail, I asked to see the superintendent, a Mr Saigal. I explained that I had just arrived from Bhopal, having met the Chief Minister, who was considering my application to interview Phoolan Devi and other dacoits who had surrendered in 1983. I started questioning him about his experience of them, asking for his own opinions. Flattered at being interviewed by a city woman, probably feeling the self-importance that officials often do, he opened up, much to my surprise, and invited me into an office outside the main prison gates. He asked me a few questions about myself and then began to talk.

He told me that Ghanshyam, who had surrendered at the same time as Phoolan Devi, had escaped from police custody while on a day's parole and was now dead. He had been shot, ambushed by police informers who had infiltrated his gang a few months after he tried to regroup in the ravines of Uttar Pradesh. The superintendent told me there was great enmity between Phoolan Devi and Malkhan Singh, which had caused problems in the jail. The two gangs had had to be separated after a fight broke out one night. Members of both gangs had been injured.

Malkhan Singh had been leader of the largest dacoit gang operating in the ravines. With more than 70 men under his command, and sophisticated automatic weapons at his disposal, he had been considered the "Godfather" of the Chambal Valley. He had surrendered to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh a year before Phoolan Devi, in 1982.

Apparently, his ego was offended. "When he entered jail," Saigal told me, "hundreds of reporters, thousands of villagers came to see

him. But when Phoolan arrived, it was like a flash of lightning. We had to call in extra police to keep the crowds away from the gates. No one asked to see Malkhan any more. They would stand around for hours just to catch a glimpse of Phoolan through the bars."

We talked in this way for an hour or so, about inter-gang rivalries and disciplinary problems within the jail. Then Saigal came up with what I really wanted to know.

"Her brother, Shiv Narain, now works for the Madhya Pradesh police force," he said, laughing loudly, shaking his head at the craziness of it all. "They've even given him a *gun*," he added, trying to control his laughter, "in line with his duties!"

I laughed too and said, "That's the paradox of our country." My response relaxed him and he told me where I could find Phoolan Devi's brother.

The police quarters, airless, concrete blocks that stood in a small cluster, were visible from the prison gates. A rough, dusty road full of pot-holes and stones ran along one side. I had been directed to the corner block at the end. As I approached, I saw a white cow and an enormous, regal-looking long-haired goat tied to the metal railings of a staircase leading up to the flats. They sat close together dozing, like two domestic pets, and I recognized them instantly. I knew from press reports that Phoolan had insisted the animals be brought to Madhya Pradesh together with her family, under police protection, before she surrendered. It had been one of the "conditions" of surrender. Without much difficulty I found a room on the ground floor where I met members of her family: Moola, her mother, Rukhmini, her elder sister, Rukhmini's three children and Shiv Narain. I explained who I was and why I was there. Within a few minutes, we were drinking tea and chatting as if we had known each other all along. The women were the most forthcoming; Phoolan's brother, Shiv Narain, was at first shy and reticent, perhaps just cautious, but he too began to speak freely after a while.

They spoke of their own experiences. Moola recalled the night that police, under Chaturvedi's command, organized their evacuation from Uttar Pradesh, from her husband's ancestral village, where Phoolan Devi had been born. The cow and goat had been

reluctant to enter the lorry piled high with all their worldly belongings and had to be lifted by constables. They found life in the city strange.

"Phoolan was the queen," Moola told me in a matter-of-fact way. "While thousands flocked around her, we were starving. The police had guaranteed us two meals a day but, I suppose, they had other things to do and forgot. Many a day passed when we didn't have even dal and roti to eat."

I was reminded of Phoolan's first disciplinary charge in prison, which I had read about in London. The press clipping I had been sent said that "on the evening of 22 December 1983, her brother-in-law was searched while leaving the jail and the assistant jailer, Mr Mathur, found 2 kilos 400 grams of dal, 2 kilos of sugar, 2 cakes of Lifebuoy soap and 2 packets of Panama cigarettes on him." He had confessed, after some interrogation, that Phoolan had given him these things, from her own rations, for the family. The stuff was confiscated and Phoolan given a stretch in solitary confinement. I had found it quite shocking at the time that Phoolan Devi should be better off, materially speaking, in prison than her family were outside.

I asked about the incident and got mute nods. I sensed a sudden sadness descend and asked Rukhmini if the person mentioned in the report was her husband. Tears filled her eyes as she nodded again. Then Moola intervened and told me that Rukhmini's husband, Rampal, had died of some unidentified illness the previous year; her daughter was now a widow with the added responsibility of bringing up three small children.

"And tell her how they beat him over that incident," said Rukhmini, her anger breaking through the tears as she wiped her face with the edge of her sari.

I couldn't find any words to express my sympathy so instead I placed my hand on her shoulder. We agreed to meet again the next day.

I started to make regular visits, sometimes taping interviews, at other times just listening to them talk. I took many photographs with my Instamatic camera, for Phoolan had been told that I was in

Gwalior, seeking permission to see her and Man Singh, and she had asked me to send her pictures of the family, of her cow and goat, to put on her cell walls. The camera was easy to use and everyone took turns, fascinated by the flash that automatically came on indoors. During the day, while Shiv Narain was at work and the others visited the prison, I met various other officials in the hope that they could assist in some way.

I made an appointment to see the town's Commissioner. I wanted to know if the Chief Minister had communicated with him regarding my application to interview ex-dacoits in Gwalior Central Jail. He had not. The Commissioner was definitely a city man, probably educated in one of India's exclusive public schools. He was suave and confident, an enthusiast about ancient monuments. He talked endlessly about old forts and I realized he was impressing upon me the fact that he was a "man of culture", not a mere bureaucrat. Antique carvings, in stone and wood, adorned his living-room. He lived in a spacious bungalow with armed sentries at the gate, within walking distance of my hotel. Throughout our conversation, I kept trying to persuade him to talk about dacoits, the Chambal Valley, Phoolan Devi and Malkhan Singh. He cleverly sidestepped all my questions and continued to elaborate on the cultural heritage of our great country. I was growing impatient but had to remain polite and appear interested. I needed his help. He was the only link I had with the Chief Minister in Bhopal. Eventually, knowing that I had arranged to meet Moola after she returned from visiting Phoolan in prison, I began pushing my questions for the last time. Had he ever met Phoolan Devi? What did he think of her?

He shook his head vigorously – and both his hands – as if any contact with Phoolan might have contaminated him, and said, "I saw her once – from a distance. Anyway, why this interest in Phoolan? She's just an ordinary village girl, you know, nothing special. Not even pretty. An ordinary village girl."

"But she's become somewhat world-famous, hasn't she?" I ventured.

He laughed, shaking his head again. "The world is made up of fools," he stated, staring at me hard.

I tried to look as if his cliché contained words of wisdom that deserved serious consideration. I needed his support. "However," I persevered, "she *has* become something of a phenomenon."

He was quick to reply. "I don't know why. She's illiterate – cannot even write her own name. It's the press, the media that have built her up. In her own right she is nothing."

He went on to advise me not to waste my time on her and said he could arrange for me to visit some famous old forts in the area so that my time in Gwalior would be "well spent". I thanked him, looked at my watch and said I had another appointment but would be in touch again.

Back in the scooter, I told Ashok the driver that I was already half an hour late so we had to move fast – a reckless and foolish remark, as his normal speed was already manic. We had several close encounters that day, with other scooters, bullock carts, pedestrians and tongas. I tried telling him I was not *that* late – Moola would wait – but by now he had gained enthusiasm for my project, having met with members of Phoolan's family, and assured me that I had nothing to worry about. He'd been driving scooters for many years and had only been involved in minor accidents – all the fault of other, less experienced drivers. Above the roar of many horns, hurtling through clouds of dust, he told me that his cousin-brother also went *faraar* (took to the ravines) a year before and had not been heard of since. It was his way of showing a kind of fraternal solidarity. Baghis were clearly respected in his world.

At the police quarters, I found Moola and Rukhmini cooking rotis and potatoes. They had missed the morning visit but would go in the afternoon. They wanted me to eat with them and said they'd take the rest into the jail for Phoolan and Man Singh. I said that I'd tell the scooter driver to go and have something to eat and come back in an hour but they wouldn't hear of it and invited him in too. As I watched them cook, I realized they were still essentially rural people with village ways, despite three years in the city. They cooked on a wood fire. Rukhmini remarked that kerosene stinks and changes the taste of the food. I agreed and watched them as they fanned the smoking choola (stove).

Rukhmini then said Phoolan wanted a personal gesture from me, something that would indicate my intentions towards her. At first I was puzzled, then Moola explained, "It could be anything: she wants your nishan [mark], something that is yours." All I had of any worth was a thin silver chain with a mango-shaped medallion. I took it from around my neck and handed it to Rukhmini, saying, "It's the best thing I have here in Gwalior. My sister gave it to me." Rukhmini smiled, stuffed it down the front of her blouse and continued to turn the rotis.

We ate and they asked me about my own life, which I answered as best I could. Nothing seemed to sound odd or unusual to them. They accepted without question that I lived in another environment and therefore had different habits. Moola even rummaged among her son's things – under his pillow, in the pockets of his civilian clothes – and came out with a packet of cigarettes. They had seen me smoke but, until then, I had always wondered if I should. Generally, women in India do not smoke – not in public, at any rate. Another middle-class hang-up demolished at a stroke by Phoolan's mother. I felt a friendship was growing between us.

Later that night, I finally got the break I'd been looking for. Moola and Rukhmini turned up in my hotel room with the three children, full of conspiratorial excitement. Phoolan, they said, was to appear in the High Court the next morning. It was some sort of routine hearing of little significance. I was to go to Gwalior High Court by 10 a.m. The prison guards who were to accompany her would allow me access to her cell. In celebration, we ordered pakoras – fried snacks – and ice cream for the children and soft drinks for ourselves. I added rum to mine. Rukhmini had a sip and screwed up her nose. The bucket of ice that accompanied the freshlime-soda was considered a great luxury.

3

Meeting Phoolan Devi

THE COURTYARD WAS crowded, early the next morning. Male prisoners, in leg-irons and chains, squatted in groups, accompanied by indifferent-looking guards in khaki, with rifles slung over their shoulders. Their relatives, mostly village people clutching bundles of home-cooked food, hovered around the compound. I was not sure where to look for Phoolan Devi in this confusion.

Inside the building, the corridors were full of lawyers dressed in black, watchful as city crows. I enquired from one or two which court Phoolan Devi would appear in. They said she was not listed to appear. Then as I walked back towards the entrance one of them came after me and told me in a confidential whisper, "They never list her – for reasons of security." Thanking him for the information, I went back out into the sunlight and confusion of the courtyard, hoping to find either Moola or Rukhmini.

After a while, I realized that a man wearing a lungi was following me. He was smoking a bidi – tobacco rolled in tobacco leaf – and his presence made me uncomfortable, so I mingled with the crowd, trying to look as though I knew what I was doing. Eventually he approached and asked quietly, politely, "Is it Phoolan Devi that you seek?"

I nodded, completely taken aback.

"Follow me," he said as he started to walk ahead, leading the way.

I had come too far to turn back, so I decided to take a chance, wondering whether I was being naïve. I was aware that in my city clothes, simple as they were, I was conspicuous and that people were staring. I felt increasingly self-conscious.

Behind the court, we reached what looked like a shed: white, crumbling walls with a makeshift tin roof, sheltered by a neem tree and an insecure-looking door. I made up my mind not to enter this place with this man. He banged on the door and a khaki-clad policeman, holding a rifle, opened it. Behind him I saw Phoolan Devi.

She gave me a warm, bright smile, pushed past the guard and embraced me. "I recognized you from the pictures you sent through Amma [Mother]," she said. "Quick! Come in." Phoolan then thanked my guide and informed me he was on bail and had once been a member of her gang. He left, just as casually as when he had followed me and led me to her.

I entered the "cell". It was more like a broken-down barn. A male prisoner, wrists and ankles manacled in heavy iron chains, sat smoking. Phoolan Devi was not handcuffed and looked completely relaxed. About ten armed guards filled this 12-by-6-foot room.

Phoolan and I sat close together on a rickety corrugated-tin sheet that covered what used to be a sink. It wobbled every time either of us moved. We clutched each other to regain balance and laughed. She examined my clothes, telling me her favourite colour was pink. She played with the glass bangles on my wrist. She touched my hair and placed her elbow on my knee. I began to understand that, unable to speak her mind in the presence of armed guards, she was checking me out without words. Sensuously, deliberately, instinctively, as an animal would do. I relaxed. I knew she was testing my reactions, my *fundamental* response to her, cleverly and deftly, without clarification or explanation.

Dressed in a bright yellow nylon sari, she wore a gold ring in her left nostril and my silver chain round her neck. She fondled the chain, tilted her head and smiled at me. No mention was made of the present I had sent her the day before and I realized that, whatever she might say, she was aware of the need to leave many things unsaid. She wore silver anklets and a black thread knotted round her wrist, amidst yellow and gold glass bangles, which indicated her participation in some puja or religious ritual. Her

small, slender frame, the mobile expression on her face – a tribal face with high cheekbones – made her look almost like a child dressed up for some occasion. It was hard to imagine her with a gun. A rifle like those that hung from the male shoulders crowding the room seemed almost too heavy for her to hold, let alone use. Yet it was such a rifle that she had surrendered.

I was not sure what to say. I wanted to say how important this meeting was for me and to explain my purpose, but I felt inhibited as I eyed the guards. She followed my thought process; in a gesture of affectionate humour she thumped the man closest to her in the chest – the one who had opened the door – and said, "Don't worry about him. He's from my village." We all laughed.

The man in chains began to interrogate me. "Where are you from? What do you do?"

I told him I was a researcher.

"What's that?" he asked.

I added the Hindi word for "journalist" and he nodded in understanding, then began to tell me that he was one of the state's most wanted killers. I felt Phoolan Devi nudge me in the waist with her elbow as we listened.

Suddenly, a female prison warden entered the cell. She said to Phoolan, in Hindi, with a sense of urgency, pointing at me, "They know she's here. They've cancelled your court appearance so you have to go back to jail." She handed a piece of paper to one of the guards.

As Phoolan left the cell, escorted by all but two of the guards in the room, I tried to assess the situation. The prison warden indicated that I should remain where I was. The male prisoner was still telling his tale, impatient about the interruption, trying to make me shift my attention back to him. He was very proud of his exploits and assured me that he had "political contacts". He even asked me if I would like a cup of tea!

Several minutes passed before the warden returned to say that Phoolan was on her way out, near the gate. "They say she must go back," she said with a shrug. Then, with a direct kind of simplicity, ignoring the others in the room she said, "She wants to know how

long you will stay in Gwalior. There is someone she wants you to meet. You must speak to her mother." I nodded and, without being able to thank her properly, rushed out of the door.

I raced through the courtyard, no longer self-conscious, unaware of the drama I was causing as I forced a passage through the crowd in order to reach the gate. I knew several tiny side streets led off it. They could take her in any direction.

The man in the lungi was at the gate and pointed me down a particular alleyway. I kept running till I saw the posse of police, surrounding a bright yellow sari. I shouted out, asking them to wait. They all stopped, looking somewhat confused, but I was not looking at them.

Phoolan Devi, still casual and relaxed, said, "Meet Amma. Don't worry, we'll meet again. Stay in Gwalior a few more days."

I asked the guard from her village if I could talk to her for a few minutes. He said it was not allowed.

Phoolan interrupted my attempts to persuade him and said, "Talk is not important. What else do you want?"

"Photographs," I said. "Proof that we have met."

She stared me straight and square – her strength is most definitely in her eyes – and said, "Take them. Now. Then run."

I did as she said, as fast as I could, knowing that a crowd was gathering behind me. She posed for me. It was over in a few seconds. One of the guards behind her was coming towards me, a look of irritation on his face. I took one last shot, we smiled at each other and then I took her advice and ran.

The attention I had drawn to myself made me feel vulnerable. Fortunately, I spotted Ashok on the road just outside the court gates. He was talking to the man in the lungi. I rushed up to him and said, "Come on, we must move fast." To the man in the lungi I said, "If you see her mother or her sister tell them I'll see them this evening." He nodded as I turned to follow Ashok down another crowded lane where he had parked the scooter.

Later that day, I had made an appointment to see the Deputy Inspector-General of Police, Gwalior, Ayodhya Nath Pathak. I was tempted to cancel the appointment, being exhausted by the events

of the morning and intimidated by the heat of the afternoon, but Ashok advised me against it.

"I've heard he's a good man," he said. It seemed he was fast taking on the role of my co-researcher.

He dropped me at the hotel and returned later, at 3.30 p.m. on the dot, knowing that the DIG was an "important" man and that punctuality was essential.

Police constables began to salute as I approached the DIG's office. I nodded in acknowledgement, wondering what kind of tyrant I was about to meet. I was ushered into a vast room with vast desks, somewhat like a conference room. Portraits of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi adorned the wall at one end. Another, of Mahatma Gandhi, was decorated with a garland of fresh flowers. There were several phones but little clutter on the desk.

Mr Pathak, in his mid-forties, was like a gentleman-fox – sharp, cunning, trained to monitor detail but very much a "gentleman". He rose from his chair as I entered, folding his hands in a namaste, rather than shaking my hand. I felt clumsy, clutching my files and notebook, as I returned his greeting and sat down in the chair he indicated.

He came straight to the point. "I know you're a journalist. What do you want to know?"

Amazed at his directness, especially after my meeting with the Commissioner, I blurted out, "I want to know whatever you can tell me about Phoolan Devi."

He asked me if I would drink lassi and ordered two glasses. "So, you want to know about Phoolan," he said, leaning back in his chair, a meditative look on his face.

"I want to know how you see her, as a police officer," I explained, trying to take the emotional content out of the way I had begun.

"She's an elemental woman," he replied, "a kind of female Heathcliff."

I was impressed. I had never heard a police officer talk in this way. "Have you met her?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, several times." His response was casual as he rang a brass bell on his desk.

An armed sentry came through the curtains of an adjoining room. Pathak instructed him to tell the "secretary sahib" to bring him Phoolan Devi's file from the CID office. We drank lassi, I smoked cigarettes, he chewed tobacco and we talked.

He said he knew the family well and he described Shiv Narain as a "bright lad". He said he felt sympathy for Rukhmini's situation and was trying to get Mathra Prasad, her eldest son, into the Police School as a cadet. "It means he'll get some formal education and eventually go through the necessary training to be a constable. Have *you* met Phoolan?" he asked suddenly, so I told him about the difficulties I had faced in Bhopal and Gwalior. I decided it was best not to speak of my escapade at the court that morning.

I asked him how closely he was connected, workwise, with Phoolan Devi and he said; "I do what I can. Technically, she is in judicial custody so the police have no say, as such. Occasionally, I receive complaints from her or members of her family and then I stop to consider what I can do to assist them."

"So you want to assist?" I asked, somewhat foolishly.

"But of course," he laughed. "I was born into a family of farmers. I understand these people. I also understand the powers-that-be in this society." Then he told me a charming story about his first formal interview in Delhi, when he had applied for entry into a "government job":

"Actually I had applied for the foreign service – my mother thought that was the best, you see! After that the IAS [Indian Administrative Service], and my third choice was railways."

I smiled. "So how come you ended up in the police force?"

"My name appeared on a list – they had vetted the applicants for all these various jobs – and I was placed accordingly."

At the interview, he told me, he had felt intimidated by the snobbery of city people, who were familiar with things that he had never seen before. For instance, a closed door with a shiny brass knob. He had wondered if the knob had a purpose or was simply a decoration. It hadn't occurred to him that it opened the door.

"When the interview was over, I tried to leave the room,

pushing this unyielding door, much to my embarrassment. It wouldn't budge!"

By this time I was laughing outright, enjoying the story. "What did you do?"

"Fortunately," he replied, "before I could speak they rang some bells and a uniformed attendant opened the door from the other side. I told my mother I had failed the interview."

Obviously he hadn't, and had now reached the position of being one of the most highly-decorated officers in the Indian Police Force. There, too, another irony: his medals had been gained by shooting dacoits, tricked and ambushed by a network of contacts and informers.

I asked him whether he was drawn to literature and he said, "It's one of my favourite things." He quoted some lines from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, prefacing them with the comment, "This is as straight an assessment of the Chambal Valley as you will ever get:

> . . . where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water . . ."

Quite something, I thought.

The file arrived and he began to give me some facts. Phoolan had made 27 demands at the time of her surrender. Her first criminal offence had been assault, when she was in her teens: assault against her cousin over the cutting down of a neem tree on her father's land. Her parents were poor peasants caught up in a land dispute involving her father's elder brother, Biharilal, who was now dead. He made no judgements about Phoolan, saying that a policeman's job was to arrest a suspect, not to judge the prisoner. He was without prejudice in many ways. He told me I would have to travel to remote villages, talk to local people, understand the terrain and its culture, before I could understand Phoolan. Sound advice. He gave me the names of villages in the ravines that featured in Phoolan's file for one reason or another. He talked of history and spoke of other legendary characters among bandits. He warned me against certain things.

"Don't refer to them as dacoits when you speak of them among their supporters; you know it comes from the Indian word *Daku* which has disrespectful connotations. They prefer to be called *baghis* because they see themselves as rebels fighting injustice."

"And do you think they are?" I asked.

He laughed. "Now that's a loaded question. After all, I *am* a police officer!" It was my turn to laugh as he continued, "It's not as simple as that. Each case is different. I have seen the capacity for extreme cruelty among these people. I have met others who have a deep sense of honour. One cannot generalize. If you are interested particularly in Phoolan, you should see Rajendra Chaturvedi, who is now posted in Rewa. A fine officer."

Picking up the intercom on his desk, he asked for Chaturvedi's office and residential telephone numbers, which he wrote down and handed to me. We had talked for a long time and I began to feel I was imposing on him. I had seen a number of people sitting on a bench outside, presumably waiting to see him. I got up, thanked him profusely and asked if I could get in touch again.

"Any time," he said. "You have my number." He rose and escorted me to the door. "By the way," he asked as I was leaving, "have you read *The Yellow Scarf*, about Sir William Sleeman?"

I said I remembered it from childhood (there had been a copy in my father's house), but it seemed to be out of print.

"You must read it again. We still use it as part of our syllabus in the Police Academy, you know. You may borrow it from our library if you wish, as long as you don't go off to Bombay with it."

I assured him I would return it within a couple of days and gratefully accepted the note he gave me for the police librarian.

Having collected the book, I set out to find Ashok. I went round in circles for half an hour or more; every scooter looked the same and I wished I had noted the number. Finally I recognized his two-tone shoes jutting out over the driver's seat. He had fallen asleep, his face covered with a cloth as protection from the sun. Waking him, I told him to drop me at the hotel then take the rest of the day off. He reminded me that Moola and Rukhmini would be expecting "us", but I felt too tired for any more conversation that

day. I asked him to leave a message at their place that I would come early the next morning. I told him he had been absolutely right about Pathak Sahib.

That night in my hotel room I read *The Yellow Scarf* (*The Story of the Life of Thuggee Sleeman or Major-General Sir William Henry Sleeman, KCB, 1788–1856*) written by Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Tuker. Sleeman had been an officer in the Bengal Army and also in the Indian Political Service. I saw immediately why Pathak felt he was, historically, such an important figure. The record of his experience is invaluable to anyone attempting to understand the cults and tradition of present-day baghis. Much remained unchanged. Living replicas of the protagonists of old existed on both sides of the law.

For instance, the author recorded how Sleeman had brought to an end his eight-year hunt for Feringheea, the Prince of Thugs, the "devil incarnate", as he thought him to be. Having heard from an informant that Feringheea had gone with his family to a particular village, apparently to organize new Thug incursions, Sleeman had sent instructions to the police that night to surround the house where Feringheea was known to be sleeping. "And remember this," Sleeman had said, "the family is almost as important . . . Get me them, if you can't get him, and I will have him in jail before winter's gone." At the last minute Feringheea had eluded his would-be captors but they did indeed secure his mother, wife and child, seeing to it that they were "comfortably ensconced" in Saugor jail. As a ploy to flush out Feringheea, it succeeded:

> One bright morning in January 1831 there was a concourse of curious people standing round the great tree in the Saugor court compound. Among a group of armed police there stood a tall man, shackled ankles to wrist. He was the centre of interest. He appeared very tired but maintained his dignity, while some quality within him seemed to keep the crowd silent and at a distance. A police inspector broke away from the group and walked into the court-room where Captain Sleeman was sitting.

"Your Honour, I have brought Thug Feringheea. Shall I march him in?"

"Yes, bring him in," and turning to his clerk: "Now you will see Shaitan (the Devil) himself." Sleeman picked up a thick file, placed it before him and started to study it.

The guard marched the prisoner in.

"Sahib, Thug Feringheea," announced the inspector.

Sleeman went on reading as though this prisoner were of no account. The minutes ticked on till at last the British magistrate looked up at the man before him. With a slight

> start Thuggee [Sleeman's nickname by then] realized that this limb of Satan, whom he loathed beyond all things, had dignity, self-possession, and commanded attention. Looking casually out of the window he asked the Thug in Hindustani why he had come – what he wanted. Feringheea replied evenly that he had come to demand the release of his family whom Sleeman held unlawfully . . .

Phoolan Devi's mother had also been taken into custody unlawfully. She had told me how the police had held her as bait in the hope that Phoolan, hearing of her mother's plight, would give herself up. It hadn't happened. Both mother and daughter bore the punishment, having undergone many such hardships in the past.

Moola, from her account, had not been "comfortably ensconced". Police had arrived at her home in the village one day and driven her away in a police jeep for questioning. When she denied all knowledge of her daughter's whereabouts, they had sent her to Orai Jail in Uttar Pradesh, on some sort of "holding charge". There she remained for six months, in a tiny solitary cell.

"Shiv Narain was in school then," she recalled, "but he would come every Sunday to see me, bringing milk and whatever food they could spare from home. I told the others not to come in case they too were arrested. I thought my son was safe, being a child, but then one day they started beating him, slapping him around the head and pushing him to the ground before my eyes. They said it might help me remember where Phoolan was. I was so shaken

after that, I to[illegible] him not to come back again because I could do nothing to protect him. So from then on, for the next four months, I saw no one from my family."

She was repeatedly interrogated, sometimes at odd hours during the night. She was slapped and beaten, threatened and abused. On one occasion she was hit so hard she fell against the corner of a wall, cutting the side of her head open, and needed stitches.

"Finally, the police changed their tactics. I suppose they knew they couldn't hold me for ever. I was taken to a room one night and asked to sit down. I felt afraid. They had never offered me a chair before. I began to cry, thinking they were about to tell me they had found Phoolan and killed her. Then the officer in charge put a whole pile of money on the table – bundles and bundles of notes. I had never seen so much money in my life. He told me, 'This is the reward the government is offering to anyone who can lead us to Phoolan Devi. You can have it all if you take me to her. Think of all you can do with it. You can educate your son and make your family rich.' He told me to have a closer look. He told me to count it I didn't touch that money. I didn't even look at it again. Instead, I stood up and, touching my stomach, said, 'My only crime is that I gave birth to her. You can shoot me for that if you like and you can shoot her too if you find her.' Then I started crying again – more out of relief than anything else. I knew they were about to let me go."

It is still common practice throughout India, when dealing with the poor, to take a hostage from the family when the wanted person cannot be found. Such people have no recourse to the law since they know nothing about how it operates.

Although I had learnt much from my first visit to Gwalior, I knew I was getting nowhere in terms of meeting Phoolan Devi in order to interview her. I also knew that even if I *did* get permission to see her in jail, it would in all probability be a short visit, under conditions that would not enable her to speak freely or at any length. What I needed was many hours with her, repeated visits, in a relaxed environment. This was clearly not going to be possible. I discussed the problem with her family but they remained hopeful

and kept telling me not to give up so easily. Phoolan had agreed to tell me about her life, she wanted to see me and spend time talking to me and that, they said, was significant in itself. Phoolan had refused to co-operate with many people in the past, including "Bombay film wallahs" who had apparently offered her large sums of money for the exclusive rights to her story. I was greatly reassured by all this but still could not see a way forward. Then, out of the blue one night, an idea occurred to me. If Phoolan couldn't talk to me directly, she could tell her story to someone else who could write it down for me. I had experienced her way with words the day I met her and was impressed by the way she had spoken to the press in the past. At the time it seemed a little far-fetched but there really seemed no other alternative.

When I spoke to Moola and Shiv Narain about it the next day they said it was possible. Moola said she would discuss the idea with Phoolan . For obvious reasons, I cannot describe how this was finally achieved but it *was* achieved, over a period of almost three years. If any of us had known at the time that it would take that long, we probably wouldn't even have attempted such an arduous process. All Phoolan asked me was where she should begin and to clarify, as we went along, what I needed to know in order that I might do some justice to her story. She has always felt that the press never understood her, never gave her a fair hearing. Much of what is to follow is based on these "prison diaries", which I received in instalments, handwritten in Hindi by a variety of scribes.

To fulfil my part in the scheme of things as they had evolved, I took Pathak's advice and made arrangements to travel in the ravines with members of her family and other people I would be working with.

I left for Delhi, saying I would be back soon, as Phoolan Devi got down to the task of telling her story.

4

The Hora Field

THE NEXT TIME I arrived in Gwalior, I found that Moola had just left for her brother's village in Uttar Pradesh; Shiv Narain couldn't take any leave just then and Rukhmini was keeping the household going, cooking every day for her brother, her children and her youngest sister, Munni, who had returned from another relative's village. To earn a little extra money, Rukhmini was also working part-time in the police grain store, separating wheat from husk by hand, for seven rupees a sack. Her hands were lacerated but she made little of it, saying, "I am accustomed to such work. Shiv Narain's salary won't support us all." In fact, she said, she was grateful to have found some sort of job. She knew many in the city who couldn't and, besides, Munni, who was about twelve by then, had taken over all the washing and cleaning and could look after the children when she was out. Clearly, no one was in a position to travel with me so I decided to hire a jeep and go on alone. My first stop was Bhind. There had been one important breakthrough; I had the first part of Phoolan's diary. Half a notebook, to be precise: paper was precious so the exercise book had been neatly divided in two. As I travelled, I read.

It began like this:

"My name is Phoolan. My parents were very poor. We were five sisters and one brother and my parents found it difficult to bring up six children. My father would work the entire day and in the evening come back with food for us and only then could my mother cook to feed all of us. It was out of these meagre earnings that they saved up for the court case. I had often heard my parents say that the lawyer asked for too much money and where would the money

come from? I remember asking my mother, 'Who is a lawyer? Why does he ask for money?' And from her I learnt this story.

"My father was one of two brothers. His name is Devidin and his older brother was Biharilal. My uncle has a son called Maiyadin. My father is illiterate but his brother was not. Without his knowledge, my uncle had bribed the sarpanch, the headman of the village, who kept the land records, to transfer all my grandfather's property into his name. Ignorant of this, my father kept toiling on that land and it was only after he had reached the age of nineteen or twenty that he asked for his share. It was then that the two of them – my uncle and my cousin – turned him out of the house and my father was forced to build a small hut on the outskirts of the village. They took over the land and my father did not get any share of either the 80 bighas of land we had in the village, or the two-storeyed family house that my grandfather had built.

"At first, my father appealed to the village panchayat – the elected council of the village – to help him get his share of the land, and meetings had been called to discuss the matter. Biharilal denied in the presence of the whole village that my father was his 'real brother'. He said he was a servant on whom he had taken pity. The villagers who knew our family didn't believe this and advised my father to file a suit, which he did, but Biharilal kept winning on the strength of his money. Sometimes my father would make some headway. Because of this my uncle and Maiyadin continued to harass them. They wanted to drive my parents out of the village so that they would have no further claim to the land. My uncle would keep the whole crop from the land in his house and even if my father worked somebody else's land, on a crop-sharing basis, he would send his servants to reap the harvest at night when no one was watching and add the stolen grain to his own. He tried to undermine them whenever he could and, if my mother or father protested or lodged complaints, he would send goondas [hoodlums] to the house to attack them. This was all before any of us were born.

"Ever since my mother told me this story, I began thinking of the evil my uncle and cousin had perpetuated and I felt that fire of hatred. He who had four servants working for him, feasted on milk

and jalebis while my parents survived on dry roti and water. I begged my mother to show me those fields which they had illegally occupied and she pointed them out to me. Some of the land was across the river and part of it was at Mangrolhar. It was the month of Chait. I said to my sister, Rukhmini, 'Let's go and eat some hora [chickpeas] from our fields. After all, it is our father's share."

Rukhmini had been reluctant and asked, "What about Maiyadin?"

"What about him?" Phoolan Devi had laughed back, in the mood for an adventure as she strode on ahead of her sister towards the river.

It was many years since Rukhmini had thought of that afternoon although it had been the beginning of a long chain of events that were to follow. At the time she had not been aware of the weight, the significance that day was to have for their lives. Neither had Phoolan. She too could not put a date on it, except to say, "It was the month of Chait," the spring festival celebrating the birth of the young crop. She had been about ten at the time and her sister, Rukhmini, thirteen.

The Jamuna River, calm and steady at this time of the year, flowed past their home, built high up on the ravine's edge, past the village of Gorha Ka Purwa. Everyone from the villages scattered along its banks, drank its waters, swam in it, bathed in it and washed their clothes, spewing all manner of pollutants into its course. Landowners and rich farmers had tapped its resources by installing mechanized pumps here and there, which pumped water into their fields above the sandy cliffs that encased it.

For Rukhmini and Phoolan, bathing in the river was a daily ritual which they both looked forward to. They had just come away from the family's parched, three-bigha plot of millet-like bajra. Bajra, in itself, would yield no more than six hundred rupees that year, after keeping back enough for the family, so Devidin had decided to try sunflowers. He had been told that, if sold in Kalpi to manufacturers of sunflower-seed oil, they would fetch a good price. Also that they needed little water. He had decided to try and interspace his new "cash crop" with the bajra, already a foot high

in his fields. Phoolan had been helping her father clear weeds, the only thing that seemed to grow in abundance on their dry land. The sun, high in the sky, burned into their backs as they worked in silence, their heads wrapped in wet towels as protection against sunstroke. When Rukhmini arrived to say her mother was calling him, Devidin decided to take a break and the two girls headed down to the river.

Before entering the water, Rukhmini tied her sari up around her legs like shorts. Phoolan took off her muddy dress, entering the water naked. She looked much like a boy except for her long, uncombed, sun-bleached hair. They could both swim like fish, in and out of the water, through the fast current to the opposite bank and back but neither challenged the other to the "race" that day, being exhausted by work and the crippling heat of midday.

Rukhmini had spent the morning mixing cow dung and straw in a bucket, after which she had repaired a broken patch in the wall of their hut. Another bucket containing just cow dung and water had been used to replaster all the floors.

While helping her sister to dry her freshly-washed sari, by holding it up against the wind, Phoolan Devi repeated her intention of going to the fields that Maiyadin occupied. Rukhmini tried to dissuade her but, being older, decided to follow out of a sense of responsibility. She knew only too well the strength of Phoolan's stubborn spirit. Her ability to be reckless was also part of her nature and everyone in the family had at times been either amused or annoyed by it.

Rukhmini was very different from her sister: quiet and gentle, soft-spoken and easily upset but always reliable. She shared a bed with Phoolan and they whispered together late into the nights. During most family fights and arguments, she defended Phoolan and now, once again, felt protective as she walked some paces behind her. They reached the edge of a lush-looking field. Hora mixed with mustard.

"This is only part of it," Phoolan informed her. "Isn't it beautiful? Come, let's go and sit right in the middle!'

Rukhmini, apprehensive as she felt, followed her sister, treading

carefully over young seedlings. The hora was knee-high. Phoolan Devi, in high spirits as she moved through the bright yellow flowers of the mustard crop, turned to Rukhmini and said with the joy of conviction, "One day this will be *ours*!" Rukhmini doubted that but sat down by her sister who was picking green hora from the taller plants. As they sat, feeling the luxury of their surroundings, chewing on the soft nut-like pea, they saw Maiyadin's servant and watchman approaching, striding briskly across the fields towards them.

Phoolan Devi pressed hard on her sister's wrist and said, "Leave this to me." Rukhmini had expected trouble and was not looking forward to it now that it had arrived.

"What are you two doing here?" the servant demanded to know. "Go home!"

"Just sitting," Phoolan Devi replied, "besides, this *is* like home," she added as she laughed, offering him some raw hora from the palm of her hand.

"Don't give me any bakwas – Maiyadin won't put up with any of your back-chat. If you don't leave now, I'll call him."

"Call him then," said Phoolan, still smiling as if she didn't have a care in the world.

As expected, the servant returned with his master. Rukhmini wanted to leave but Phoolan was determined to stay, so she too stayed. They watched as Maiyadin, dressed in crisp white, crossed the fields in their direction.

"Look at him," Phoolan said to Rukhmini, "dressed like some Thakur. The truth is, he's a common thief."

As he approached, Maiyadin looked confident and arrogant, his features hardened by the exercise of authority, even though he was still in his early twenties. Looking straight at Phoolan Devi, recognizing her as the protagonist of this scene, he said quietly but firmly, "Go home."

"But this *is* like home," she replied defiantly, "I've already told your servant."

"Don't try and act smart with me. Get up. Both of you. Get up and go – and don't let me see you on my land again." He was shouting.

Undaunted by the aggression in his voice, Phoolan Devi plucked a flower from a mustard plant and stared back at him. "*Your* land? Who says it's your land? Huh?"

Maiyadin turned to his servant and instructed him to throw them off the land. The servant, somewhat nervous of tackling Phoolan Devi, grabbed hold of Rukhmini and started dragging her towards the edge of the field. Phoolan rushed to her sister's defence, only to be pulled aside by Maiyadin. She fought back, biting into his hand, screaming abuse and, in the struggle that followed, managed to bring him to the ground by tangling her legs around his. In a fleeting moment she had the satisfaction of seeing her cousin's spotless white clothes muddied, his look of humiliation and his face distorted with rage. Phoolan herself cannot remember what happened next because she lost consciousness. She thinks he found a piece of wood or brick and started beating her around the head.

In her diary she said:

"Leaving us there, he went to our house and took my parents to the village sarpanch and complained, saying, 'This man's daughters have been stealing hora from my fields.' The sarpanch ordered my parents to be beaten, holding them responsible for our behaviour. My mother pleaded with them, saying we were only young but they were thrashed and abused anyway. My mother told me later, 'It was as if they wanted to break every bone in my body.' It was in this condition that my parents came to fetch us from the field. My mother was in tears and kept saying we had no future in the village. She begged my father to look for suitable bridegrooms for both my sister and me. Within weeks in 1967, my father went to see a boy in Teoga village for Rukhmini, as she was older than me. He returned saying that both he and his family were suitable enough.

"My mother asked him to try and borrow some money for the marriage but, though he went to almost everyone in the village, no one was willing to give him anything because they were afraid of the sarpanch and Maiyadin. So, eventually, my father went to the village of Narhan and borrowed some money against his land and my sister was engaged to be married.

"Arrangements were made and everything was ready for the

wedding but eight days before it was to take place, the sarpanch found out and started asking where the baraat [wedding party] was coming from. Someone told him it was the village of Teoga in the district of Kanpur.

"My parents were not aware of what was happening. All our relatives had collected at our house and festivities had begun. On the day of the tikka ceremony, relatives went to the outskirts of the village to welcome the bridegroom but discovered there was no baraat and no bridegroom. They returned home wondering what had gone wrong and why the baraat had not yet arrived. Just then Maiyadin and the sarpanch arrived with the police and said my sister was a minor. They accused my father of marrying her off for money. My father denied this and said he had borrowed money but they refused to listen. Instead they started threatening our relatives, demanding to know the truth."

Present laws in India prohibit both child marriages and the payment of dowries but, given the social and economic realities that prevail in villages throughout the country, these laws become meaningless. They are only used to extract bribes and intimidate those whom the authorities wish to prosecute. Otherwise, age-old traditions are not only allowed to continue but encouraged within village society. Nearly every village I have travelled in, throughout the length and breadth of the country, is still trapped within this practice. There are few exceptions.

"Eventually, the sarpanch pulled my parents aside and said he would persuade the police to let them go 'this time', provided they were given some money. My father had borrowed for the wedding 2000 rupees, which they took and Maiyadin even unchained one of our cows and handed it to the daroga [Inspector] as the police left the village.

"Seeing my father so upset and worried, one of our relatives said he knew of another boy to whom Rukhmini could be married, quickly and quietly to save her any permanent disgrace. My father went to see this family. They were very poor and agreed immediately and my sister was married off in a hurry. I knew my turn would come next."

Strangely enough, Rukmini grew to love her husband, Rampal, despite all the humiliation she had been subjected to preceding her marriage, and they had three children before he died some years later in Gwalior. These were the children I had met in the police quarters, Mathra Prasad, Usha and Santosh.

5

Child Bride

As I TRAVELLED across the Madhya Pradesh border, crossing the Chambal River into Uttar Pradesh in a hired jeep, I pored over Phoolan Devi's words, slowly, laboriously. I had not read anything of any substance in Hindi since my school days and struggled with the handwritten script, working my way at a snail's pace around an unfamiliar writing. At times the driver of the jeep, Lakshman Rao, helped me decipher sentences and paragraphs that seemed to run into one another, exhausting the eye and the mind. As time went on, although the writing became more familiar and I managed better, I decided that I would have to recruit the help of someone in Bombay or Delhi to translate it all into English, in order to save time.

Still, protracted though the process was, the events of Phoolan's life unfolded as we passed through the ravines of central India, breaking our journey every night wherever we could.

It was May. Water was scarce and becoming a major problem. Every well we stopped at was either dry or contained only a few feet of water at the very bottom. Villagers were always helpful, lending us their buckets tied to what seemed like an endless length of rope, so that we could pull at the dregs. What emerged was a sort of muddy brown swill that looked dangerous to drink. The driver informed me that it wasn't even fit for the radiator of the jeep, which had begun to drink gallons. We began stopping at rivers and streams, wading into the middle where the current was at its strongest and drinking those waters in the hope that the pollution gathered at the banks.

The rivers were our saviour and there were five that crisscrossed

the terrain. In addition to the problem of finding drinking water and water for the jeep, there was the blistering heat of the sun to contend with. At the driver's suggestion, I bought two towels at a market town and a plastic bucket which we filled with water and kept on the floor of the jeep. Every half-hour or so, we would wet the towels and wrap them around ourselves as we drove. They provided great relief – a kind of basic air-conditioning! Another technical problem arose. The metal floor of the jeep was so hot that the edges of the plastic bucket began to melt, so we had to get a metal one instead. After that we had to be content with hot water for the towels, which cooled as they dried in the wind as we moved on.

For the first time in my life I understood the frantic feeling of thirst and the importance of water. Food began to seem irrelevant. I was beginning to understand the life that Phoolan Devi had led. She had spent many such summers in the ravines with little shelter.

We were headed towards the city of Kanpur when I realized we were about to pass through Kalpi, the town closest to the village where Phoolan Devi had been born. Her mother Moola's village, I had been told, was not far off and Moola was in Nagina, her ancestral home. I asked the driver to stop at Kalpi to ask for directions. He looked somewhat despondent when he heard I wanted to go to another ravine village, rather than the city, which promised some comfort and a break from the relentless heat. I assured him we would get sleeping spaces, water and food, and that, besides, the village was on the banks of the Jamuna River so he could bathe and swim to his heart's content while I interviewed Phoolan's mother and members of her family. He laughed and replied, "It's not like that – I will take you wherever you want to go. If you can take it, so can I. After all, I'm a man!"

We reached the village of Nagina late that evening, just as it was growing dark. Lakshman Rao, having taken command of the situation, instructed me to stay in the jeep while he found out where the house or hut was. I accepted gratefully, knowing he would create less of a stir in the village than I would have done, wandering around in the dark trying to find Phoolan Devi's

mother. I lit a cigarette and gathered all the scattered belongings in the jeep into a neat pile, knowing that we would have to carry it all.

I was proved wrong. After some time, I saw a troupe approaching the jeep – shadows in the dark, as the village had no electricity. It was Lakshman Rao, together with Moola, her eldest brother and a horde of children. I cannot describe their welcome. They made me feel honoured, impressed by the fact that I had made the journey to meet them. The children wanted a ride in the jeep and Moola's brother told me the jeep should be parked near the house for safety. The road would take the jeep to his cowshed. The children piled in and the adults, apart from the driver, walked in front of the headlights, leading the way.

We talked in the light of kerosene lamps late into the night in the shelter of their roofless courtyard. The hospitality was unimaginable. Food was cooked hurriedly – dal, potatoes and hot rotis. Water, brought in a huge earthenware pot, seemed abundant. I was told it was "safe", coming from a tubewell that had been dug deep, below the natural water level of the village well. Moola told me I could share her charpai – a string bed – and sleep with her in the open courtyard, which was the coolest part of the house. Lakshman Rao said he was happy to sleep in the jeep but the family wouldn't hear of it. The jeep, they said, was perfectly safe near the cowshed and he too would be provided with bedding and could sleep on the roof, the other cool spot in the house. I could see that he was comfortable and relaxed and had got completely absorbed in the spirit of the project.

Certain things impressed me. As soon as we had finished eating, Moola said, "Smoke your cigarette – don't worry, you are among friends." She knew I had held back, not wanting to create a bad impression on her family. She informed me that people should not be inhibited by the opinions of others if their "hearts and intentions" were true. I laughed and passed my pack of cigarettes around to the men in the group. No one smoked cigarettes. They all preferred bidis and offered me one instead. Lakshman Rao then whispered in my ear, asking if he should bring the bottle of rum he had bought for me in Kalpi. I told him to ask the rest. They all

agreed that we should celebrate so we sat there drinking rum and exchanging stories until Moola said it was time to sleep.

The next morning we awoke at dawn. Moola informed me that the time for women to bathe in the river was then, free of observers. Apparently women were the first to wake in the village and organize themselves for the day ahead. As we walked to the river, along the quiet village pathways, she took a detour into a field, handing me a tin mug full of water and saying, "It's good for the soil. The trick is to squat over the cracks in the earth but it doesn't really matter. I'll meet you at the river."

At the river, while we bathed and washed our clothes of the day before, I asked her if I could interview her.

"You can interview me at any time," she said. "In fact I may even return to Gwalior with you. Meet Mannu."

"Who's Mannu?" I asked.

"A distant relative. He knows a lot about Phoolan and has helped her a great deal in the past. He knows even more than me." She told me he was a shy sort of person who disliked being the focus of attention, and therefore didn't involve himself much with what went on with the rest of the family. She said she would introduce him to me after we had dried our clothes and had something to eat.

Mannu was everything Moola said he would be: shy, reticent, cautious and a man of few words. She introduced us, telling him almost conspiratorially that Phoolan had decided to trust me. That, in itself, was a revelation for which I was grateful. Having said that, she said she was leaving to cook and would see me later.

Mannu's hut on the edge of the ravines was very simple but quite beautiful, its mud walls half-covered with overhanging branches that encroached from the jungle beyond. He also had an open, roofless courtyard in which we sat. I decided to get straight to the point, to alleviate his suspicion, and showed him what I had of Phoolan Devi's "diaries". He read the notebook with intense interest while I sat in silence. I told him that although my spoken Hindi was all right, I found reading difficult. He merely nodded. I said I had reached the point of Phoolan's marriage, after Rukhmini's, and asked if he could tell me anything about those days. He

said he had not been present at the actual ceremony but had witnessed the negotiations that preceded it. I asked him to tell me whatever he could remember about the occasion, and what follows is his account.

He had gone to his aunt's home on a visit and found the family deeply distressed over many matters, afraid of Maiyadin's power and influence in the village, afraid of what the future had in store for them. Devidin needed a helping hand to tend to his fields so he had offered to stay on for a while. His own ambition at the time had been to find a job in the city of Kanpur, where he had a few contacts but was waiting on "answers".

It was late afternoon when he first saw Puttilal, the man chosen for his cousin Phoolan Devi by her maternal uncle. Puttilal had relatives who lived in Gorha Ka Purwa, Devidin's village, and there had been some talk between the two families. Unknown to Phoolan, her mother had at first resisted the idea, saying that Puttilal was too old – almost twenty years older than her daughter – and was annoyed with her brother for having put the idea into her husband's mind. Devidin had been adamant, saying the family was more prosperous than their own and that Phoolan needed a firm hand. He invited Puttilal to discuss the arrangement despite his wife's protests but when the day came, Moola had shown no sign of her inner resentment.

Two charpais, covered with brightly coloured quilts, provided the only seating in their tiny mud-walled courtyard. The concept of privacy was non-existent in the village. Everyone's life was constantly observed, unless the onlookers got bored or indifferent, so from the time Puttilal arrived with an older man – either his father or a relative – a crowd gathered steadily in the doorway leading to the street. Phoolan was indoors dressing for the occasion, in a sullen and gloomy mood, surrounded by her younger sisters and other girls of her own age from the village. Her hair had been washed and oiled, her clothes freshly scrubbed. The only new thing she was given to wear was a pink dupatta – a thin veil – with which she had been instructed to cover her head before facing the man she was to marry.

Devidin sat with his young son on his lap, facing Puttilal and his unknown relative. Shiv Narain was proof of his manhood. His daughters were proof of his burden. Mannu sat beside him, while Moola was busy handing out tea and sweets to the guests. The atmosphere was tense, the conversation stilted as the village audience watched with growing curiosity. The children were the most bold, darting in and out of the courtyard. Moola, used to their ways, gave the odd one a shove, telling them to keep out of the way.

Mannu had felt a deep sense of sadness that day, as he studied the man his favourite cousin was to marry. Puttilal was austere and humourless, a man who looked older than his years, whereas Phoolan Devi was still a high-spirited child, full of fun and laughter, mischief and rebellion. She had barely spoken to Mannu that day, treating him like a collaborator but, as he explained, he had been a helpless observer like the rest. Years later she was to turn to him for help, but on that midsummer afternoon neither of them could have predicted what was to follow.

Eventually, having run out of small talk, Puttilal's relative impatiently came to the point, "Can we at least see the girl? Time is getting on and we wish to come to some definite arrangement today before leaving."

Moola, by then busy frying puris, shouted into the house. "Bitia! What's taking you so long? Come out here." Phoolan emerged from the house, her head covered as instructed, eyes glued to the floor, and sat down beside her cousin without saying a word.

In her presence they talked, negotiated her worth, as Puttilal and the older man scrutinized her without inhibition. They seemed unimpressed, but that, as Mannu explained, was probably because they wanted to strike a good bargain and not seem over-eager. His uncle, Devidin, sensing their lack of enthusiasm said, "*Vo sai hai.*" (She's chaste.) "*Kisi ne uspe haath nahin dala.*" (No one has laid a hand on her.)

"That's not the point," Puttilal was quick to riposte. "If we didn't know that already, we would not have come. Our family is well respected in the village. What I want to know is, how much do you want?"

"I'm a poor man," Devidin responded. "As you can see, she is young. She's a hard worker too. She can work like a man."

"We have not had any easy time either," Puttilal replied. "My first wife died. I'm a poor man too. How about a milch cow and a bicycle – for your son?"

Devidin emphasized the fact that he needed money, cash.

Suddenly there was a distraction. The village "mad woman", to whom Phoolan had been good from time to time, who had bathed with her and Rukhmini in the river, pushed her way through the crowd, shouting at Devidin, her hand on her hip. "Have you no shame? A cow and a bicycle? You call me mad but you are the ones who are mad – trapped in your greed!" She flounced off, forcing a passage back through the onlookers, abusing all in sight, her skinny frame just barely covered by a torn shabby sari. Her intervention was in vain.

Moola spoke for the first time, directly to Puttilal, insisting on a gauna, the local term for an agreement that ensures a period of time before the child bride moves in with her husband. Three years is what she demanded and eventually the deal was struck. Puttilal added 100 rupees to his original offer – roughly £5 at the time.

"After that," said Mannu, "I don't know much more. She was married after I left and I did not see her again until a few years later."

I knew I had met another storyteller with a remarkable ability to remember detail and asked if I could visit him again. He said he would travel with us to Gwalior and visit Phoolan in jail. He said he knew a lot more about Phoolan Devi but could only talk of what he had in mind after speaking to her. I agreed and said I intended to travel to Phoolan's village one day. He advised me to speak to the "mad woman" who had been rejected by society but was "not so mad after all". I said I would; and, many months later, I did.

Talking to Moola later that night, I asked what happened to the gauna agreement. I had read that Phoolan had gone to her husband less then three months after her marriage.

She shook her head and in a tearful voice said, "Bitia, poverty is a terrible thing. We are forced to do many things because of it. How else can I explain?"

I decided not to push the question. I knew I could get the answer from Phoolan; I had merely been testing the facts, trying to work out the correct sequence of events.

Phoolan Devi told me, much later in a letter, responding to the same question:

"He came for me within the next few months, saying he needed his wife. He told my father that unless he agreed, the marriage would be cancelled and he would find another wife who was more suitable. My father agreed to let me go, saying it would add to my 'dishonour' if I didn't."

As Phoolan left the house, clutching a small bundle of clothes, her mother wept and her father took the cow out to pasture as her brother fell off the bicycle that was too big for him to ride. She walked in silence, a few paces behind her husband, knowing that one part of her life had ended. The man who led the way to the village of Maheshpur Ki Mariya was a stranger to her and someone she had already grown to fear.

Through her diaries she said: "I did not understand the meaning of 'husband' and when he made passes at me I would scream and shout, not knowing the meaning of these gestures. My fear angered him and he would hit me. He treated me like an animal. He would touch my breasts and say that I was like a baby teetar – a partridge – and asked when I would mature. He was a pervert, in my eyes, and I soon learned that his first wife had died in childbirth at the age of fourteen. The child had also died. When he took me to his home I was eleven.

"Fear made me fall ill. My mother heard of this and sent my father to fetch me. At first he resisted, saying that the last time he had visited me he had been insulted and humiliated. They had demanded money to 'put up' with me. Still, my mother pleaded and he came. She said if God granted the blessing of children he should not mete out poverty with the same hand. When my father arrived to take me home, late one night, he was abused and insulted again. My husband said he had been 'misled' about the kind of woman I was and would only have me back if my father paid him 10,000 rupees.

"I remember it was night and pouring with rain but they insisted that if he could not pay the money he should take me and leave. I had high fever so my father carried me three kos [six miles], on his back, wrapped in a blanket, to Sikandra thana [district]. There he found a doctor who diagnosed my illness as measles. My father bought some medicines for ten rupees and carried me to the bus station. I lay there a whole night waiting for the early morning bus to our village.

"My mother, seeing my condition when I arrived home, sobbed and said it would have been better if I had died. Where could they find 10,000 rupees and how could they afford to keep me for the rest of their lives? In addition, Puttilal had more or less thrown me out and word would spread in the village that I had brought 'disgrace' to my own family and to his. No one else would be prepared to marry me since I was still his 'wife' and everyone would hear that he had rejected me. My mother's response shocked and hurt me but I knew what she was saying was correct. I had no future in the village. At the time, I felt too ill to care or think about it much. I was very glad to be home, whatever the consequences might be.

"When Maiyadin found out that I had been turned out of my husband's house he arrived once more with the sarpanch and said if my father signed a stamped paper they would see that I was accepted back by Puttilal. In desperation my father was easily convinced and ready to sign, but someone drew my mother aside and explained that the paper, which none of us could read, carried a declaration that my father was not Biharilal's real brother and therefore had no further claim over my grandfather's land or property. When my mother heard this she caught hold of my father's hand and said she would not let him sign anything, irrespective of whether I went back to my husband or not. Maiyadin was furious. I was thirteen or fourteen by then."

During this time, Moola decided to send Phoolan away temporarily to the neighbouring village of Teoga to stay with a distant aunt whose daughter-in-law had just given birth. The visit, Moola thought, would serve two purposes. Phoolan could assist

her aunt with household chores; and by the time she returned, they all hoped, the talk of how she had been dumped on the riverbank by Puttilal would have died down.

When Phoolan arrived at her aunt's home, she was introduced to her son Kailash, recently married but bored with his existence, despite his wife and baby. Phoolan's arrival in their household brought a new interest into his life. His cousin had seen much of life and had not lived in the shelter of domesticity like his wife. Phoolan had wit and humour and a sense of fun. Her sharp tongue, her confident spirit, despite everything she had suffered, impressed him and one day he invited her to accompany him to Kanpur so that he could show her the city. It was an exciting offer for Phoolan Devi, who had never visited any place larger than Kalpi. She had been to Allahabad with her father to attend court hearings, but that was different; all she knew of Allahabad was the journey from the bus-stop to the court and the rooms and corridors of the court house.

She travelled with Kailash to Kanpur in a bus. She found the city intimidating, baffling, and felt like a pauper in her village sari and cheap plastic sandals. Mesmerized by his attentions – he bought her an array of glass bangles in different colours and walked her through market streets, pointing out various places – she noticed little except him that day. Kailash seemed to know the city well and this too impressed her. He took her to visit a famous temple, where he said he wanted to marry her. She laughed, telling him not to be stupid, he was already married, with a child to prove it! To demonstrate his feelings, he placed a garland over her head in the inner shrine of the temple, telling her that "in spirit" she was his wife and the only one he wanted. Phoolan Devi had never known any man except Puttilal and the experience of a romance was new to her.

Kailash took her to a teashop, crowded with men. She felt conspicuous, being the only woman, but safe with her distant cousin. Here, too, he was considerate of her feelings and introduced her to the old woman whose son owned the shop. Phoolan talked to the old woman and watched the black-and-white television set fixed high on one of the walls, fascinated by the

moving picture. She recalled clips featuring Hindi songs, from films she had never seen. She observed Kailash talking to a group of young men playing cards. Later, on the way home, Kailash made some remark about "all of them" being baghis, dacoits. She did not believe him, thinking he was showing off, trying to impress her by hinting at secret connections with an underworld that most people in the area held in awe.

As the weeks went by, their affair continued, until one night Kailash's wife confronted him. She had heard gossip in the village. Some children had apparently seen them bathing upstream, naked. Phoolan Devi expected her lover to stick to the vow he had made in the temple, but although he made some effort he eventually gave in to family pressure and agreed that she should be sent back to her parents' home. Hurt and humiliated, once more the target of exaggerated rumours, Phoolan Devi took the boat journey back across the river to Gorha Ka Purwa. It did not take long for the story to travel and for Maiyadin to convert it into public scandal.

I had occasion to visit Kailash's village to meet Phoolan's younger sister, Ramkali, who lived there with her husband and had recently borne their first child. By then Kailash was dead, though his widow and two children still lived in the same house with their in-laws. I was advised by Moola not to "get mixed up" with them, but I didn't escape the gossip and fantasy. One old woman told me, "Phoolan Devi used to dance naked in the moonlight for that man!" Many suspected that Phoolan had been responsible for his death. However, the truth of the matter seems to be that he worked as a "casual member" for various dacoit gangs in the area, running errands, organizing food supplies and passing messages, for which he was evidently well paid. (His family lived in one of the few brick houses in the village.) It is possible that he overstepped the mark or betrayed a confidence, ending up shot dead by one of the smaller gangs in Uttar Pradesh. His brief affair with Phoolan Devi led to further conflict as she began to gain the reputation of being loose.

In her diary she wrote: "I continued to live with my parents and we all worked hard and lived peacefully for some time. Three of my sisters were still unmarried and my brother was still young. He was

the first one in our family to attend school. My father had begun to farm a few fruits, like melon and watermelon, on land near the river which he had encroached on in desperation, and for a year or so we were comfortable, with an abundant crop.

"Then Suresh Chand, the second son of the sarpanch, began following me around. I was suspicious, because I knew his brother Ashok Chand was Maiyadin's friend. I tried to ignore him but he started visiting my mother, always polite and respectful, saying he was on our side. She was taken in by him and always gave him a warm welcome, making him tea and so on.

"When she was not around, he would make obscene gestures, winking at me and showing me money. When I went to the well, he would whistle and flirt with me in public, throwing pebbles at my pitcher in fun. I told my mother but she said it was just part of his nature because he was young, and I should not take too much notice. On the whole she considered him to be quite harmless. He had succeeded in flattering her. I kept my distance, knowing deep down within myself that I could not trust him, but he became a regular visitor to our home. My father also welcomed his visits, thinking that at least one of the sarpanch's sons was on our side."

6

Disgrace

THINKING BACK on those early teenage years of her life, Phoolan Devi recalled some events with a keen eye for detail.

It was late evening, she told me, recalling the mood of the day: the sun had lost its glare and all around her had been quiet and still. She could hear the distant voices of people making their way back to the village, accompanied by cowbells and the shriek of birds fighting over the limited spaces available to them for night cover.

The few trees that exist in the ravines become battlefields for birds at twilight as they fight noisily for favoured branches. I had watched them many times and understood immediately why Phoolan had used the word "shriek", although at the time I did not know the significance she drew from these sounds and images. The behaviour of birds and animals is at the centre of folklore and superstition in the Chambal Valley.

The fields around had been deserted as she sat down, at the edge of her father's field, for a moment's respite. The bajra she had cut still had to be tied into bundles, held together with long reeds of dry grass. After that she would carry as many headloads as necessary back to the village. Their crop was meagre, growing precariously on an isolated slope on the outskirts of lusher fields, surrounded by the ridges of the ravines. Lost in her own thoughts, she had not noticed the bicycle pull up in the dust track behind her. When she heard a man's voice calling her name she had been startled at first, then relieved at seeing it was Suresh Chand. Although she felt uncomfortable in his presence, he was someone familiar, someone known to her family.

"Oh, it's you," she had replied casually, rising to assemble the

pile of bajra that lay in the field. He had sat around talking for a while, she says, and had then offered to carry the load for her on his bike. She had been grateful, aware of the time and effort it would save her. Then, encouraged by her shift from suspicion to gratitude, he had become somewhat flirtatious but she had tried to ignore both him and his remarks, concentrating on her work.

Eventually he had approached her, still casual and friendly, and placing his hands on her shoulders and said something like, "They say you are good in the fields – that you make a man feel he can never have enough."

She had known at once what his intentions were and fought back, biting into one of his hands, showering abuse in his direction. After that she had run as fast as she knew how, up the ravine slopes into the village.

She had reached the village square, racing past people who had begun to stare, and she had been about to turn into the gullies that led to their home when Suresh Chand pulled up beside her on his bicycle. Throwing it to the ground, he had confronted her, taken off his leather sandal and begun hitting her across the face and head. She had fallen to the ground, trying to protect herself from the blows.

A crowd had gathered and he had been beside himself with rage, shouting: "You Sudra-Mallah, low-caste whore! I'll show you how to behave!" He had started to kick her, telling the crowd she had attacked him, bitten his hand, because he had refused her a favour.

In all the commotion that followed she had screamed, "He's lying . . . he's lying!" He had spat into the mud close by her face before picking up his bike and leaving her in a circle of village observers. The memory of her humiliation that day still haunted her.

"After this incident my parents told me, 'Beti [Daughter], we are poor people. They are rich. There is little we can do so you must forget about this incident. We cannot afford to fight these people.' I felt so angry and humiliated and began to realize that there is no justice in this world. I prayed to Durga Mata to punish Suresh Chand but he still strutted around the village like a peacock, aware of his power. From then on, he began instigating the whole village

to harass us. Friends of the family used to advise my parents to leave the village but we had nowhere else to go. I cannot describe fully how much they harassed us."

Around this time, Maiyadin made what seemed to be a conciliatory visit to the house, saying he was deeply concerned about all the gossip in the village. "After all," he said to her father, "whatever has happened in the past, what they now say about your family affects mine too." He spoke of "family honour" and the need for some solution. He said he had spoken to Puttilal's relatives in the village, who felt Phoolan Devi should return to her husband of her own accord, in order to patch things up and save all concerned from further insult and ruin. Eventually, Devidin was persuaded.

"Maiyadin was determined to return me to my husband, the very thought of whom frightened me," Phoolan says in her diary. "So, wailing and sobbing, I left my parents and went with Maiyadin, who delivered me back into the hands of that beast.

"Puttilal had taken on another 'wife' – a woman called Vidya – who demanded to know why I had returned. My 'husband' showed me to a tiny room and handed me a thin, tatty quilt, telling me that this was where I was to live. It was at the back of the house, next to the cowshed. A little while later, his second wife came and started shouting again, calling me names, telling Puttilal she would kill herself unless I was sent back to my mother's house. I told her I did not want anything except a few rotis, that I would work as she wanted and that I would not interfere in their lives. I said I had no interest in her husband and had been brought back, against my own will, by my cousin. It was then that she gave me two dry rotis to eat and an old cot to sleep on.

"In the evenings I slept on the cot and as soon as it was daylight, she sent me to cut fodder for the cattle after which I was given a mug of lassi to drink. I had been there eight days, worked to the bone, often hungry. I thought a lot about my mother and my home. Seeing my plight, even Puttilal felt pity and asked me to eat something. Vidya saw him giving me some food from the kitchen and pounced on me, saying I had come deliberately to share her

husband. She became hysterical and started pulling the bangles off my wrist. She broke them and pushed me out of the room. I had not eaten the food . . .

"At four in the morning she would tell me to grind ten kilos of wheat. By the time she returned I had been able to grind only two and a half. She would hit me and say I could not expect to eat without working for it. She'd hand me a large bucket and ask me to fetch water from the well. After that, she'd send me to collect cow dung from the village streets, telling me to mix it into a paste with my hands for the floors. My 'husband' watched as that woman ordered me around, shouting and swearing at me every now and then. She was not short of ideas!

"This situation continued for some years and I was always falling ill. Eventually, Puttilal agreed to take me home, saying I could spend some time with my family and have a rest. Innocently, I accompanied him.

"Leaving me on the banks of the Jamuna River, opposite my village, he said he would look for a boatman to take us across. He said he'd be back in five minutes. It was four in the afternoon and till late that evening I waited for him. It was getting dark. I sat there crying, waiting, knowing that I could not return to my parents' home unaccompanied, since they had sent me back to my husband at Maiyadin's insistence.

"Suddenly, I heard a boat. I was frightened at first, wondering what else was in store for me, and then I heard my parents' voices calling out to me. I stood up and waved. My cousin Mannu was with them. I broke down when I saw them and recounted my story. My mother said it was to be expected, since I had been sent back to Puttilal because of Maiyadin. My father remained silent, but my mother told him that now my humiliation was complete and she was taking me home. I asked her how they had found me. She said there had been talk all round the countryside that a woman had been seen sitting on the sand for a long time. Gossip in the village had made her think it might be her daughter."

Although Phoolan Devi was not aware of it, around this time, about the mid-1970s, women's groups in urban centres up and

down the country, groups reflecting various shades of feminism, were highlighting experiences such as hers. Endless cases of "dowry deaths" and sexual assaults against women were being reported, demonstrations organized and calls made for changes and modifications to the law. All these developments, repeatedly the focus of middle-class attention in the cities, meant little to her. Her isolation and sense of humiliation, as her mother confirmed, had become complete.

The connection between words and life, the disconnection between experience and action were, almost universally, the sign of the times and the fact that a woman like Phoolan Devi – or hundreds of thousands like her, scattered throughout the villages of India – felt no affinity with nor were aware of "the movement" is merely a reflection of the movement itself, of its lack of experience. The women who marched were deeply concerned and dug up facts and stories around which to run campaigns, but the women at the heart of the events on which they campaigned remained faceless, if not nameless. This is not to say the demonstrations were useless or the slogans false or "out of touch with reality", it is just a way of stressing the magnitude of the oppression faced by women, against the backdrop of a fundamentally feudal society which was still caught up in the crossfire of change. Nothing they did or said made any difference to the course Phoolan Devi's life was to take.

Statistics prove that many hundreds of women died during this time, murdered by their husbands for failing to attract more money in the form of enhanced dowry payments. The most common method was, and still is, to pour kerosene over the woman, set her alight, then claim to the authorities concerned that it is a case of suicide. In situations of rape, more often than not the woman is blamed either for having "loose" morals or for having encouraged her rapists, even in situations where a woman has been raped by policemen while in their custody!

Political activity sometimes delivered results. For instance, Jyoti Punwani, a journalist from Bombay, reported:

In 1978, Rameeza Bi, a burqah-clad woman, was raped by four policemen in Hyderabad's Nallakunta police station. When her husband abused the police, he was beaten to death by them. This led to anti-police riots all over Andhra Pradesh. Eighteen police stations were burnt and twenty-six persons shot dead in police firings. The army had to be called out and a judicial inquiry was set up.

> The Hyderabad police, from the DIG [Deputy Inspector-General] down to the constables involved, did their best to establish that Rameeza Bi was a prostitute and her husband a pimp. They got prostitutes and pimps to testify, tracing Rameeza Bi's past in her village, and even doctoring the post-mortem report. The Muktadar Commission, however, dismissed all the evidence brought by the police and held the police guilty of rape and murder.

On the other hand, another case history recorded by the same journalist tells a different story:

> Mathura, a village teenager raped by two policemen in a police station in Maharashtra, was accused by the police of being of loose character and having consented to sleeping with her rapists. The Supreme Court upheld the view.

None of these events taking place on the national stage made any difference to the realities facing Phoolan Devi as she returned to the village of her birth and began working with her father and her cousin Mannu in the fields, assisting her mother with household chores, determined to prove that she would not be a burden to them. One thing preoccupied her: she did not want to be sent back to her "husband" again. Her mother, she thought, understood and had accepted the finality of her predicament but she still watched her father's reactions nervously and feared for the future.

Devidin Kewat had never known anything but poverty, hardship and disappointment and as he grew older, his troubles seemed to multiply instead of getting any better. Soon after he married Moola, a strong-minded, hard-working, able-bodied woman,

despite her slender frame, they had their first child, much to everyone's joy and relief. For a woman to be barren was a curse; all around her would suffer. They had both looked forward to a son but Rukhmini was a healthy, fair-skinned baby and her parents were proud. Sons would follow, they had been assured. When Moola became pregnant again, less than two years later, Devidin prayed to the gods for a son.

Some Holy Man he had met in Kalpi advised him to feed his wife a crushed pearl on the night of the next new moon. It would guarantee the birth of a boy. Devidin walked into a jeweller's shop for the first and last time in his life to buy a single pearl. It was something he could ill afford. Still, the pearl was duly crushed at a simple *puja* ceremony organized by the Holy Man, who also had to be paid and fed in a manner more lavish than their own and, at the end of the ceremony, Moola gulped down a glassful of the finely crushed powder mixed with warm milk.

Devidin was working in his field the day his wife's relative, Mannu, came rushing to tell him that his second daughter had been born. His spirits sank as if tied to rock. He had done all that was within his ability, he had accepted his dharma and karma, his duty and his fate, but he had not been rewarded. "I'll come in a minute," he told the six-year-old boy facing him, as he turned back to his pickaxe and the unyielding earth.

Despite her own disappointment, Moola named her second daughter Phoolan Devi – Goddess of Flowers – although no one celebrated her birth.

All these thoughts of the past festered and Devidin, according to Moola, became more and more detached in day-to-day relations as the years went on. From his point of view, he needed a son: someone who could share his load in life, take responsibility for the land and become his heir. Another daughter was the very last thing he needed. As if to punish him, he still maintained years later, the gods had sent him two more daughters. His fifth child was a son and his sixth, another girl. His son was too young to help him much in the days after Phoolan Devi returned home, having been abandoned by Puttilal on the banks of the river. Besides, his mother

had insisted on sending him to the local village school, so he was not trained in the ways of the land and would, in all probability, grow up wanting to move away from his ancestral home. Like many others of his generation, he would inevitably be drawn to the city.

Devidin had been born into a caste of fishermen – Mallahs – a sub-caste of Sudras at the very bottom of the Hindu hierarchy. Above him were three other castes and hundreds of sub-castes. The Brahmins were the priests, highest in the structure, regardless of their personal wealth. Below them were the castes of Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, warriors and traders; and, finally, Sudras like himself, doomed to menial jobs and the brunt of disrespect from the rest of the village community. The only people poorer and more powerless than he were the "untouchables" – those who handled other people's garbage and excreta – and bonded labourers, whose ancestors had left them in debt to some moneylender or landlord and who spent generations paying off the interest on past debts.

Within his own caste, Devidin had not quite hit rock bottom. Both his father and his grandfather had ferried people across the Jamuna River before the steel bridge linking Orai to Kanpur was built, after Independence, making them redundant. His father had turned to the land and after years of relentless labour, helped by his two sons, had managed to build a two-storeyed brick house in the village, the same house that Maiyadin now occupied. Maiyadin's wealth and property had put him on an economic and social par with the Thakurs, a sub-caste of Kshatriyas, demonstrating another reality that exists in India today. Money and property are the only tools with which it is possible to cross the traditional boundaries of caste. His brother, Maiyadin's father Biharilal, had died without healing the rift between them, refusing even to speak to him. This was his legacy. Devidin, too, would die leaving unresolved the dispute that dated back to 1949 in the law courts of India; but he didn't know that in 1978.

In fact, that year he had begun to feel optimistic for the first time in many years. Phoolan Devi, incensed by all she had suffered and endured because of her cousin, had argued their case with great

passion and conviction at the village panchayat; the village elders who made up the council were impressed with her knowledge of the facts and details surrounding their case. She had managed to reopen the hearing and their case was transferred from the Sessions Court at Kalpi to the Allahabad High Court, which was a great triumph for the family. "Influence" within local police ranks and the payment of petty bribes would have little effect in the city, thereby undermining Maiyadin's ability to manoeuvre and manipulate on familiar terrain.

Accompanied by Phoolan Devi, Devidin made regular trips to Allahabad to attend court hearings. For a change, the lawyer they had hired was sympathetic and appeared to be an honest man. Each time he sent word to the village, they would walk some ten kilometres to the main highway, then catch the bus to the city. The journey began at dawn and by the time they returned home it was dark. Devidin didn't mind the gruelling ordeal, although the bus there and back was usually like a kiln on wheels, often so crowded that there was no place to sit. They always came back exhausted but, above all, he felt convinced that God had finally given him this glimmer of hope for a purpose.

Meanwhile, Phoolan Devi, relieved to be back among her family, was determined to prove her worth, so that her father would forget the despair he had felt at her birth and her mother would feel vindicated for having supported her resistance to her "marriage".

7

The Neem Tree

THE RAINS WERE LATE. Everyone in the village talked of little else, full of anxiety, dreading the prospect of another drought. It had been a bad year. The news from the rest of the country warned against both the impending drought and floods that would follow if and when the monsoon arrived. The land had long lost its ability to hold or harness rainwater and, after the first few showers, it tended to rush down treeless slopes, washing away topsoil and leaving the land of farmers poorer than it had been before.

It is estimated that each year the rain erodes hundreds of thousands of hectares of arable land. In the ravines of central India the problem is at its most acute. The much-awaited rain tears at the land, and huge chunks of fields, perched on the edge of sandy ridges, give way, falling into the rivers below or crumbling apart, making way for the ravines to expand.

Devidin, like the others, prayed for rain but decided to take no chances. He found a job on the outskirts of an adjoining village, as a bricklayer, a skill he had acquired in more recent times. He would set out each morning just before dawn and walk to the site in order to get there by 7 a.m. Once again, Phoolan accompanied him and worked through the day carrying headloads of bricks in a basket, so that he could work faster. He was paid fifteen rupees a day – about sixty pence at the time – but could earn another ten with his daughter's help. Their joint income brought in roughly £40 a month. Meanwhile, their land lay parched and fallow, the earth hard and unyielding, as dust storms swept sandy loam in all directions.

In this desolate landscape a neem tree is rare. Devidin had one

such tree on his sun-baked patch. Planted years earlier by his grandfather, it enhanced his sense of family pride. It gave relief from the blistering sun, providing the only shade they had in their fields. Its yellow berries and leaves, when crushed or boiled, are said to heal sores and soothe skin diseases such as smallpox, chickenpox and measles. Its twigs cleaned the teeth better than any toothpaste, leaving a bitter but clean taste in the mouth, taking care of worms at the same time. Many a time this tree had saved Moola the long walk to Kalpi, in search of a doctor for one or the other of her children. When Shiv Narain was six, he had attached an old rubber tyre to a piece of rope and swung it over one of its branches. From then on, the tree became the swing in their playground.

Phoolan Devi recalls that early one morning in January 1979, her father summoned the whole family to their fields in a state of shock. His face, furrowed and weather-beaten like the land on which he worked, showed his feeling of defeat.

Outside, they examined crushed young plants of the bajra crop they had recently sown. It would have provided the family with grain for the year. Aghast, they surveyed their fields. Weeks of hard work had been trampled and destroyed by cow hooves and the heavy wooden wheels of a cart. Devidin was convinced it was the work of Maiyadin and his gang of village hoodlums – a gesture of intimidation, an act of revenge for the progress they had made in getting as far as the Allahabad High Court.

Some days later, Phoolan Devi says, Shiv Narain came rushing into their courtyard, crying, hysterical, screaming, "Maiyadin is attacking the neem tree with an axe." She remembers rushing out. Other members of the family followed. Sure enough, that was what her cousin was doing, surrounded by four of his friends, young men, sons of wealthier people in the village, the son of the village sarpanch, Ashok Chand, among them.

Intimidated by the men and the axe, Phoolan Devi shouted abuse, gathered small rocks and clumps of earth to hurl at them. A stone hit Maiyadin above the eye and he began to bleed slightly. His friends grabbed hold of her, tied her up and called the police. Her mother tried to free her, screaming all the while at Maiyadin, but

her father wanted to bring calm to the situation. Confrontation was not his way.

Accompanied by her mother, Phoolan Devi was taken to Kalpi police station in a jeep. Maiyadin and his friends, dressed in spotless white, made statements against her. It was the word of five against two. Maiyadin, she recalls, had his head bandaged to make his wound look more dramatic than it was. Phoolan Devi says she felt defensive from the start.

A paan-chewing, fat-bellied officer lectured her in front of them all. "You have brought disgrace to your family," he stated, pacing up and down and around her. "You've made enough trouble already. I'm told your husband deserted you because of it. Have you no shame? Have you no respect for others?"

Phoolan Devi remembers crying tears of humiliation. For a village woman to be dragged to a police station in captivity is a terrible disgrace. It was the end of anything that remained of her reputation. Her tears, she says, were taken as confirmation of her guilt.

Kalpi police records state: "Biharilal [Maiyadin's father] had a neem tree on her father's land cut down which led to a quarrel and Phoolan Devi was arrested under Section 452 of the Indian Penal Code. She was released after a month, on bail given by Thakur Phool Singh." It was 6 January 1979.

Asked to talk about this, her first experience in custody, she can only recall feeling vulnerable, terrified, unable to sleep properly or eat. A hole in an open drain constituted the toilet and she says she spent many hours watching flies buzzing round it.

I asked her if the police had raped her, because I had read other reports that alleged this. All she would say at the time was, "*Un log ne mere saath kafhi mazaak ki – khub mara bhi.*" (They had plenty of fun at my expense and beat the hell out of me too.) It is not unusual for women all over the world, and particularly in India, to resist discussing the sexual abuse they have been subjected to, surrounded as they are by a society that holds them responsible for the acts of violence against them and taints them with self-images of weakness and impurity.

She remembers the day she was released. It was still cold and her mother had sent her a blanket for the journey home. Thakur Phool Singh had deposited 20,000 rupees, roughly £600 in those years, at the police station to bail her out. He was a part-time employer and friend of her father. Devidin, being of a lower-caste and in need of money during the lean months of the year, had worked long hours on the Thakur's land. A friendship had grown between them despite all the barriers of prejudice. Phool Singh was a kind man but austere like her father. They walked in silence. He had spent some weeks considering the situation. During this time, Phoolan Devi had been terrified by her isolation and vulnerability.

When they parted on a dusty pathway, headed for their respective villages in opposite directions, he said, "Your parents have suffered because of you. Keep out of trouble and remember to go to court when they call you. I want my money back." She nodded, feeling the kind of humble gratitude that people feel when they know they are powerless, as she bent down to touch his feet. "I have done this for your father," he added.

She remembers her attempts to explain that she too had done what she had done for her father, for the family. She tried to explain that it was not a wild and careless act that had landed her in jail; but her explanations were useless. Thakur Phool Singh had the impression she was being defiant and unrepentant and he became sterner. She returned home fighting tears of despair, knowing that she now had a "criminal record". She was twenty-one years old.

She got an ecstatic welcome as she entered their courtyard. Shiv Narain rushed to her first, wrapping his arms round her knees. His head reached above her waist by now. Moola had cooked a huge fish, which her cousin Mannu had caught in the river that morning, and her youngest sister, Munni, had dressed up in her mother's sari for the occasion. Her father, too, greeted her warmly, although he refused to eat the fish. He was an orthodox vegetarian and said the very smell of it made him ill. Everyone was in high spirits, despite the burden of debt they had incurred in order to free her. Phoolan Devi, knowing the magnitude of her father's efforts, touched his feet and wept.

Moola had been worried about her daughter's future in the village and afraid of any further confrontation with Maiyadin and the sarpanch, through the activities of his son. The sarpanch, she admitted, was not a "bad man" but his sons provoked situations he would then have to defend. She talked late into many a night, obsessed by this worry, and eventually all agreed that it would be best if Phoolan went away for a while – to the village where Rukhmini lived with her husband – in order to maintain a low profile. Meanwhile, they would prepare for the court case and try to recruit the support of other villagers to give evidence in their favour. They would try to prove, in a court of law, that Maiyadin had brought misfortune and terror upon them all.

Phoolan Devi was happy to leave for her sister's home. She had always been close to Rukhmini and knew she would be made to feel welcome. They could spend time together, exchange stories and have some fun. She would also get to see Rukhmini's first child, Mathra Prasad.

Devidin took her to the highway, where she caught a bus to the pathway leading to her sister's village. He gave her 25 rupees. Her mother had wrapped a bundle of food for the journey and Munni had given her a fishbone from the river which was considered to be lucky.

What followed is told by Phoolan in her diaries:

"Rukhmini's house is in the district of Etawah. When I arrived, my sister was on her way to hospital for an operation and took me along.

"We had no idea what was happening in our village but, on the third or fourth day, the police arrived and informed my brother-in-law Rampal that I had been involved in a dacoity [an armed raid] at Maiyadin's house and that a report had been written against me. Rampal told me my parents had been taken to the police station and were waiting for me there. He offered to accompany me even though Rukhmini was still in hospital. We decided to go to the village first, in order to find out what had happened.

"So I arrived in a boat, armed with a paper certifying my stay at the hospital with my sister. The owner of the boat was a kind old man and told us to wait, while he checked if the police were still in the

village. As we waited, I saw what seemed like the whole village gathering and coming towards the boat, ready to attack me with lathis – wooden sticks – shouting all manner of abuse. They thought I had encouraged or arranged for a dacoit gang to raid the village because of my enmity towards Maiyadin, which they all knew about, of course. They accused me of looting Maiyadin's house and asked where I had fled to, leaving my parents to be dragged away by the police because of me.

"I explained, begged and pleaded, but no one paid any attention. They summoned the police and had me arrested. When my brother-in-law tried to explain that we had only come to the village on our way to the police station, they didn't believe him either.

"I reached the police station at 4 p.m. and was set upon and beaten up by policemen. They warned my that unless I followed Maiyadin and the sarpanch's advice I would suffer. I said I would do as they wished, upon which the officer-in-charge, Jagdish Singh, said if I had agreed to be sensible in the first place, no trouble would have come my way."

She had been roughed up and beaten by the same group of police only recently but this time it was different. She had arrived at the police station, terrified by the reaction she had provoked in the village. She saw her parents but was not allowed to speak to them. The officer-in-charge made a mockery of the certificate from the hospital, tossing it on the table, saying it was a meaningless piece of paper. Every time she tried to say anything he told her to keep her mouth shut. He also molested her, publicly not surreptitiously, using the end of his cane to lift her sari, examining her all over, while his subordinates watched her "interrogation", adding their own crude and obscene remarks.

The beatings were quite an experience too. She used her arm to try and shield her face. Her mother wept uncontrollably when she had seen the weals across Phoolan Devi's back, some cuts still bleeding, the flesh around them swelling. Then for the next three days Moola searched for a lawyer recommended to her by a retail cloth merchant they knew in the town. They didn't know him but his aunt lived in their village and her sympathies were on their side.

For Moola, he was the only person in Kalpi to whom she could turn for help. Devi Gulam was kind, elderly and also a musician and singer of songs which he composed himself. Years later, he was himself to be arrested for writing and singing, at a public concert, a song he had written about Phoolan Devi, the Bandit Queen (see p.237). When Moola first sought out his shop, in a crowded market street in Kalpi, he had not even heard of the family but he agreed to assist because of his aunt.

The intervention of the lawyer resulted in Phoolan's eventual release, after a length of time no one can remember, and Devidin had to rely once again on a loan from Thakur Phool Singh to pay the chalan imposed by the police. I tried to clarify, from Moola, whether this represented a fine or bail. Had Phoolan been charged with any offence? For Moola, those days were so far behind and they had been through so much change and turmoil since, the question must have sounded abstract. "We borrrowed money and paid them, that's all I remember. Who knows what they write on pieces of paper?"

Despite the furore that the incident had created in the village, Phoolan Devi returned to Gorha Ka Purwa with her parents. It was a tense and uncomfortable existence:

"Lots of people from the village, including their visitors, would hang around our house saying they had come to see the girl who had committed a dacoity. Mostly, I would stay indoors and ignore them. At times, when I went out to do something, they would point, make obscene comments, laugh and then ask me questions. At these times, I showered them with the filthiest abuse I could think of and showed some of them my slipper.

"I was sweeping the cattleshed one morning when a boy came and asked me where Phoolan Devi lived. I asked him his name and he said it was Bhura – 'Old Man' – which amused me because he couldn't have been more than seven or eight. We got talking and I asked him what it was all about. He said he had been sent with a message for Phoolan Devi, telling her to leave the village if she did not wish to be kidnapped by a dacoit gang. I asked him where the dacoits were and he said, 'At Mira's place.' I asked him where that

was but he didn't know. He had come from Khartala, across the river. I left him, saying Phoolan Devi lived in the next house and was not in the village that day. I promised to give her the message, adding, 'Bhaiya [Brother], you tell your dacoit friends to do just that. She has created too much trouble in this village already.' After that, I pointed to our neighbours' house, which was locked as they had gone to visit relatives, and told him that was where she lived. He nodded, played with my goat for a while and then left.

"As soon as he left, I ran to my mother and told her, 'Amma, I've just spoken to a little boy who says dacoits are coming to kidnap me.' At first, she was impatient and annoyed. She said, 'So now you think men are coming to kidnap you! Why should they? It's not as if you're some great beauty! Why do you always talk such nonsense?' It was only after I had spoken to her again and again that she finally told my father. After a discussion between the two of them, my mother and I went to Kalpi police station.

"We were finally allowed to enter after great difficulty. We met the commanding officer and an inspector whom I had seen before. The CO asked, 'Who's this girl? Why has she come here?' The inspector then told him that I was probably trying to make more trouble for my cousin and the village sarpanch. Every time I tried to explain the situation I was told to keep quiet. My mother folded her hands and begged for some protection but she was also silenced. The inspector mocked us to the extent that my mother started crying but he just said I should be sent back to my husband, or somewhere else, in order to avoid any further trouble. He told the CO that I was 'oversmart' and had given the whole village a 'bad name'. We knew we had wasted our time so my mother did some shopping in the market and we walked back home."

A few days later, Phoolan Devi received a letter. Unable to read herself, she waited for her brother; Shiv Narain was now eleven and the only one in the family who had been to school. She scanned distant fields trying to spot his white uniform. Hours passed before she saw him, taking a short cut across somebody's fields. She ran through wet clay-sand, not wanting her family to know the

contents of the letter before she did. It couldn't be good news. No one had ever written to her in her life until now.

At first they sat by the river, swollen by a sudden rush of water from the hills above to the north. She showed her brother the letter, which he read to himself in silence, looking nervously at his sister from time to time. Phoolan Devi became impatient.

"Go on then. Read it aloud. What does it say?"

"It says you have become the mistress of Thakurs. They say they will teach you a lesson you'll not forget. . . ."

"Go on, what else?"

"They say . . . they'll cut off your nose . . . your ears . . . so that you are no longer fit for Thakurs like Phool Singh."

"Who's written this stupid letter?"

Shiv Narain examined the rubber-stamped emblem at the bottom of the roughly written page and told her that it was the gang of Babu Singh Gujar, a dacoit gang notorious in the area. They had both heard of his exploits, of his reputation for cruelty, of his ruthless acts of revenge. His "lieutenant", Vikram Singh Mallah, was known to have associated with Maiyadin. This too was general knowledge.

Phoolan Devi remembers staring at the muddy waters of the Jamuna, praying to the goddess Durga for protection, for courage. Her brother clung to her arm, leaning against her. They had a close and intense relationship in those days. She was the one who oiled and combed his hair each morning as he dressed for school.

"What will you do, Jiji [sister]?" he had asked.

The conditions of Phoolan Devi's bail were that she should not "interfere" with Maiyadin or anyone in his family, nor was she permitted to "trespass" on his property. Talking to him was out of the question. Besides, she was convinced he was behind this new threat. She had seen fear in her brother's face and said, to reassure him, "Don't worry, these are only words. Let's go home."

Deep down she knew the threat was a serious one. "Nose cutting" and "ear cutting" is common in the region. It is a traditional form of punishment and retribution, much in the same way as "kneecapping" is in Northern Ireland. Women living in

remote villages who have been unfaithful to their husbands, for instance, have had their noses cut; some have bled to death. The disfigurement of the face is meant to remain a lifelong reminder of some past disgrace.

At first, Phoolan Devi had instructed her brother to say nothing about the letter to anyone, convincing him – and herself – that in all probability this was merely Maiyadin's way of frightening her and the rest of the family. Her parents had been put through enough already and she did not want to alarm them yet again. She thought of leaving the village for a while and going back to stay with Rukhmini and Rampal. Her parents would be relieved and it would ease the tension that was growing steadily in her own mind. Before she could discuss the idea with her mother, she received a second letter. It said more or less the same thing as the one before and she decided to show it to her parents. The whole family gathered to discuss the situation, debating different courses of action.

Later that day, the sarpanch's servant, Radheyshayam, came to warn her that the threat was meant and he advised her to leave the village. Once again Moola and Phoolan Devi set out for Kalpi. Radheyshayam, they knew, had come out of sympathy. Like them, he came from a sub-caste of Sudras and knew the tyranny of power. He had witnessed events that had taken place in the sarpanch's house and had little respect or affection for his master.

Recalling that last visit to Kalpi police station, Phoolan Devi said: "I showed the police the two letters I had received. I had also taken my bail records. The sarpanch's servant, I told them, had warned me that these threats were serious. He had told me the gang were camping nearby at Kishanpur and that I might be kidnapped at any moment. This time the CO read the letters and told the inspector to send a police patrol to the village. My mother asked if we could go with them but he refused, telling us to go home because he was short of men just then but a patrol would follow us 'soon'.

"It was raining very heavily. When we got home, I cooked, fed my brother and sisters, fed the cattle, then we ate and finally spread out our beddings and went to sleep exhausted. The police had not arrived but by this time I had begun to think the threat was false. I

had got used to threats, I told myself, as I lay down beside my youngest sister, Munni, who was already asleep.

"At around midnight, I woke and heard people entering our house – the sound of four or five people's feet pounding the ground. I peeped out from where I was inside the house and saw police uniforms and torches. I ran to my mother and woke her up saying, 'Amma, the police have come inside the house with torches.' My mother said, 'They may not be police. Go and hide somewhere. I'll say you've gone to your sister.'

"There was a big pile of dry wood near the choola. I hid inside it. They tied my parents up and threw them in the courtyard then asked, 'Where is your daughter?' My mother started crying and said I had gone straight from Kalpi to my sister's place. My father repeated the same thing. They were beaten and called liars but they kept saying the same thing. Then, they caught hold of my brother and were debating whether to take him instead or just to cut off his ears. My mother was screaming. I decided to go out. I told them, 'I am Phoolan. Kill me if you want but leave my brother and my family alone.'

"As I entered the courtyard, I saw about twenty-five armed men. With them was Radheyshayam, the sarpanch's servant, who had come to warn me earlier that day. Now, he had pointed out my house to the gang and helped to identify me."

8

Kidnapped

IT HAD BEEN the day of the festival of Sawan Dui, in early July 1979. Years later, Phoolan Devi described the next few days, in the presence of her mother and sister Munni.

It had been raining relentlessly and the pathways through the village had become rivers of mud. Apart from goats and dogs sheltering in doorways, the village was deserted. Phoolan Devi had been dragged from the house before she had even thought of her sandals and her bare feet sank into wet clay-sand, making it difficult to walk. They had bound her wrists with rope. She struggled to keep pace with her captors in the dark. Slipping and stumbling through slush and rock, she remembers her effort to steady her breath and keep calm. It proved impossible. When she grabbed at shrubs in an attempt to keep her balance on slopes, thorns embedded themselves in her palms. The path she normally took to the river was across the fields, but that night they made their way through the cover of thorny bushes that lined the ravine's edge, surrounding those same fields. They walked in silence.

Babu Singh Gujar led the way and the others followed in a single column. Occasionally she got a shove in her back. A man's hand, the butt of a rifle, a reminder that she was their prisoner and that they had little compassion. She was convinced that Maiyadin had been the instigator of the ordeal she was being put through. She was also aware that for the gang it was just another "job" or a "favour". It would mean they could rely on Maiyadin's assistance in the future. He was, after all, a "senior citizen" of the village and had influential friends in the panchayat. By comparison, she was nobody.

The walk to Kalpi and back – some 35–40 kilometres all told – exhausted her and her legs gave way. Everyone came to a halt. She tried appealing to Babu Singh Gujar, who led the way; she begged him, through tears of desperation, to let her go. He stuck the barrel of his rifle between her legs and laughed, before hitting her hard across the face. He asked for a knife, threatening to cut off her nose. The shock of the blow, she said, in a strange way gave her a sudden inner strength and she stopped crying instantly.

One of the men, obviously the second in command, helped her to her feet and she saw in his eyes that he did not approve of his leader's way with women. She also realized she had seen him before and she tried to think where it could have been. When she attempted to speak, he pointed ahead with his rifle, told her to keep quiet and keep walking.

At the river, a large barge-like boat was moored close to the edge. During the day, such vessels ferry camel herds and their cargo across the river in both directions, travelling an ancient trade route from Rajastan, through Uttar Pradesh into Madhya Pradesh. The current was strong and the river had already started flooding its banks. Everyone was drenched by the time they had climbed into the boat. Phoolan Devi was pushed forward and instructed to lie down in the bottom of the boat. She did as she was told. She found herself lying in a mixture of river water and camel dung. The gang members sat above her on wooden planks that spanned the boat and she has memories of being surrounded by men's boots.

She could hear their voices talking casually among themselves as if they had forgotten all about her. Someone was speaking of Kanpur and it was then that she recalled where she had seen the man who had helped her to her feet. It had been in Kanpur, in that teashop with Kailash some years earlier; he had been gambling at a card table.

Phoolan Devi says she was taken downstream, to the other side of the river. She could not calculate how far they had travelled. Her sense of the passing of time was distorted by anxiety and fear. Five minutes could have been fifteen. Five kilometres, ten. She remembers shivering, barely able to speak. Babu Gujar paid the boatmen

with a bundle of notes and both, in turn, bent down to touch his feet. All through the journey they had called him "Thakur Sahib", as did the others. A coarse-looking man, built like a concrete block, he appeared to be shorter than he was. At any rate, that was Phoolan Devi's impression as she watched him pay the boatmen. She was ordered out of the boat and Vikram Mallah cut the rope binding her wrists. They began another trek through high grass and wet sand.

Each day the gang moved camp, sometimes carrying food supplies, at other times entering small hamlets and eating in the homes of sympathizers and informers. When the gang entered a village, Phoolan Devi was left to wait in the ravines with two armed guards, finding whatever shelter she could from the driving rain. Plastic sheeting hung over roughly-cut shrubs and branches provided a shelter for Babu Singh Gujar at night. The others slept in the open, or under the partial shelter of a tree if they were lucky enough to find one.

It was beneath the awning that Babu Gujar repeatedly raped her during the first two days of captivity. She fought back but he was as strong as a bull and her feeble attempts to defend herself merely amused him and made him more cruel. After he had finished with her, he would push her out of the shelter to sleep in the open. She did not scream or cry out for help, out of a sense of her own mortification.

On the evening of the second day, Babu Gujar was drunk. He dragged her by the arm from one man to the next, asking if anyone wanted "a taste of this Sudra whore". Vikram Mallah intervened, restraining his leader and making it plain to the rest of the gang that they should not attempt to imitate his behaviour. Babu Gujar was furious at this challenge to his leadership but also knew that his lieutenant, whom he himself had promoted to that position, had the support of many in the gang. Babu Gujar pushed Phoolan to one side and went back to his bottle. The hours that followed were tense but that night he left Phoolan alone, falling asleep, saturated by country liquor. Her respite was short-lived.

Relating these events to the police in 1983, the day she surrendered to the Chief Minister, she said in her statement:

"They had my parents tied up. Then Vikram Mallah and his uncle, Vareylal, caught my hands and dragged me away. I still did not know who they were. They took me to the banks of the Jamuna. I pleaded with them not to take me away at night because I said my reputation would be ruined. They began beating me. Someone said they should disfigure me so that I would not be fit for the Thakurs. When Babu Singh asked for a knife, I said if he spared me I would go with them."

"So you agreed to go with them," a police inspector from the CID department stated, as if summarizing her tale.

"Why are you people so stupid?" she snapped back, demanding to see Chaturvedi. "I'm telling you I was kidnapped and you want to write that I agreed to go with them!"

The officer said he would write down whatever she said. Frustrated, unable to explain the extent of the panic she had felt, nor the violence to which she had been subjected, she continued:

"When we reached Narhan village and they started spreading their raincoats to rest, I realized they were dacoits. I heard them talking. They said they would not kill me but let me go after four days. Meanwhile, I heard Babu Singh asking other members of the gang whether they should cut my nose off. He warned me to stay quietly with them and said if I tried to run away he would kill me. I was so frightened that I assured him I would make no attempt to escape as long as they did not assault me physically.

"They started quarrelling over me, and Vikram Singh Mallah said that no one was to touch Phoolan. Babu Singh said that he would keep me and then they compromised that for eight days no one was to touch Phoolan, and after that she would live with whoever wanted her. But Vikram Mallah was bent on killing Babu Singh Gujar and in three days, finding an opportunity, he killed him. This killing took place at Mangalwala Thana in Orraiya district, Etawah. He took all his arms, which consisted of three Mausers, and went to Asta village, where he distributed money to everyone around him."

Speaking from prison, Phoolan Devi recalled the events of that night, 7 July 1979, the night Vikram Mallah killed his leader in defence of her honour.

It was the third day of her captivity and the tensions between Babu Singh and Vikram were apparent to all, after the incident of the previous night. They moved to another camp and Phoolan was given the task of cooking for the men on a makeshift fire. Another fire was lit for warmth and some of the men sat around it. In all there were twenty-five men in the gang. Babu Singh, after another bout of drinking, started an argument with Vikram Mallah, reminding him that he had made him what he was.

"Without me you would be *nothing*!" he declared. "Don't forget, you used to carry our baggage like a coolie and run errands for us like a *boy*, before I put you where you are!"

At first Vikram Mallah fended off these remarks with casual retorts but then Babu Singh, riled by his dismissive attitude, said in defiance of his "agreement" with his lieutenant to "leave the woman alone for eight days", that he was in the mood for a woman "tonight" and no Mallah dog would stop him. At this point, Vikram said, "Thakur Sahib, what is the point in abusing her? She is frightened enough already."

"Fright? Abuse?" Babu Singh laughed back. "I'll show you Mallahs . . . I'll teach you to remember that this is a gang made up of Thakur men . . . not fishermen!"

With his hand on the belt of his trousers as if to undo it, he was reaching for his .303 Mauser rifle when Vikram Mallah ended his life with a single shot. Two other men, distant relatives of Babu Singh Gujar, moved as if to pick up their weapons and within seconds fell to the ground, blood oozing from their wounds.

Phoolan Devi was stunned. Three dead men lay before her. She says she felt as if her honour had been restored. No man had ever taken such a stand for any woman that she knew of. She went forward and touched Vikram Mallah's feet in gratitude.

There was a moment's silence, then Bharat Singh and Madho Singh, Vikram Mallah's closest friends and allies in the gang, rushed forward and embraced him, shouting, "*Jai*! *Jai*! *Vikram*

Mallah ki jai!" Other men joined the cheer and Vikram Mallah became the undisputed leader of the gang.

Although there had been no voices of dissent, it was an uneasy alliance of castes that now existed in the gang. Babu Singh had been a Gujar, on a par with Thakurs, both belonging to the same warrior caste of Kshatriyas. He had recruited others of his own caste into the gang, in addition to men of the lower castes. Under his leadership, the hierarchy in the gang had more or less reflected the social order as it stands in villages. In these terms, Vikram Mallah ranked among the lowest, belonging to a sub-caste of Sudras, as did Phoolan Devi, Madho Singh, Bharat Singh and a handful of others.

By taking over leadership of the gang, he had completely reversed the balance of power within it. Bharat Singh and Madho Singh, both Mallahs, were automatically elevated to positions of authority and soon became his trusted "lieutenants". In the long term this was to have far-reaching consequences but on that night in July 1979 it was not apparent as all the men, including the Thakurs and Gujars, cheered. They had probably seen his confrontation with Babu Singh in personal rather than caste terms. A fight between two men, involving a woman.

One of the dead men was slightly built and short, a youngster in his teens. Vikram told Bharat to remove the dead man's shoes and uniform and give them to Phoolan Devi, instructing Madho to frisk them for money. To her he said, "We must move to another camp. This place has brought bad luck. Change your clothes."

That was the day, somewhat confused and frightened, she had climbed into a dead man's khaki police uniform and put on his running-shoes. There had been blood on the shirt and at first she felt revolted but, as they moved through the ravines, the comfort of walking in shoes and wearing clothes that were protective against thorn and shrub made her feel grateful.

That night, at another campsite, Vikram Mallah informed her that she was now his woman and therefore beyond the reach of other men. He instructed her to sleep beside him, under the awning that was now his. Although it had been a command and not an invitation, his attitude lacked the bullying authority of his pre-

decessor and Phoolan Devi did as she was told. To her surprise, minutes after she lay down beside him, tense and afraid, he fell asleep, his hand on his rifle.

"There were about fifteen or sixteen people in the gang now," she told the police. "The members of the gang warned me to stay without causing trouble, otherwise I would be killed. I was to be Vikram's mistress or I would be killed. I consented to this and for six months I was kept under strict guard in case I tried to run away."

When asked by a journalist, soon after her surrender, why she had become Vikram's mistress so readily she replied: "A piece of property has no choice."

9

Honour among Bandits

THE DAY AFTER her daughter had been kidnapped from their home, Moola went back to Kalpi police station, to report the matter and name some of the men responsible. The police, she told me, were not only dismissive but abusive, telling her not to waste their time over her good-for-nothing daughter. In their book, Phoolan Devi had jumped bail and Thakur Phool Singh would lose his 20,000 rupees unless she turned up in court when the time came. Moola returned home devastated, wondering how to break the news of this additional blow to her husband.

On her return she discovered that Maiyadin had been quick to spread word throughout the village that his cousin had run away with a gang of dacoits. It proved, he told the panchayat of village elders, that his suspicions about her involvement in the raid on his house had been correct. He wanted them to register her name with the police as a wanted criminal.

We were talking in her brother Shiv Narain's police quarters in Gwalior, surrounded by several members of the family and one or two sympathetic neighbours. My main aim at this point was to try to understand Phoolan Devi's relationship with Vikram Mallah and the events that had followed the killing of Babu Singh Gujar. I was told that members of the family would take turns spending time with Phoolan in jail in order to elicit the answers I needed. What follows is based on what I was told over a number of days by various people who were free to communicate with Phoolan Devi at the time. Later, Phoolan made her own comments, through letters and her diary, which I received over a period of months and I have incorporated these wherever they help the narrative account.

Uncertain about her future, exhausted mentally and physically, Phoolan Devi woke up the next morning and saw the men counting a large amount of money. They argued among themselves, ignoring her. She remembers realizing it was the first day she had not been shaken awake and put to work. Someone had lit a fire and everyone in the gang was already awake. Bharat Singh gave her some tea. The night before, he had given her a pair of army socks so that she could make her newly acquired shoes fit.

Members of the gang listed things they needed to buy: more ammunition, blankets, a better radio, plastic sheeting for protection from the rain and so on. Vikram was adamant that no one should touch the money that came from the dead men. "We never quarrelled over money," he said, adding that he had not killed them in order to gain a few rupees. If anyone in the gang used the money they would bring bad luck to all. He was for distributing it in a village: if they gave it to the poor it would enhance their reputation and win support for them in the region. Since he had nothing to gain, materially speaking, from his own argument, the others put up little opposition, although some suggested they save a proportion of it for future emergencies.

Not long after dawn they set off for Asta, a relatively poor village dominated by people of the lower castes, where Vikram Mallah had informers and suppliers with whom he had dealt in the past. He was determined to establish himself as leader in his own right, switching the gang's caste allegiance overnight.

It was an important move that would cause conflict in the future, but that day no one objected as they made their way to the village, avoiding known pathways used by the police and villagers alike. Phoolan Devi, now dressed in khaki like the rest, attracted little attention as she walked with the men.

As they approached the village, Vikram Mallah spoke through a loudhailer: "We are sympathizers of the poor and the sworn enemies of the rich," he announced. "We have come to give not to take. Do not fear us." A couple of shots were fired into the air by younger, more enthusiastic members of the gang but he didn't seem to mind. As the gang entered the village he said, once again through

the loudhailer, "We are not police. We are poor people like you. You have nothing to fear."

The first to run towards them from the village, out of curiosity and excitement, were scores of children attracted by the megaphone and the sound of gunfire. Phoolan Devi walked with the dacoits as though she were one of them, observing her new master. He was young and flamboyant and seemed popular with the men. He walked with a confident swagger, casual in his manner, as he talked to members of his gang and the children who surrounded them, lifting up a young girl who was thrilled by his attentions.

In the village, the first adults they encountered were two old women sitting on a string bed drinking tea. They watched the approaching posse with curiosity rather than alarm, probably reassured by the response of the children who accompanied them, jubilant and noisy. Catching sight of the women, Vikram Mallah detached himself from the rest and went up to them, holding his hands together in a respectful namaste. He touched their feet in the manner of tradition, then called out to Bharat Singh, telling him to give them money. To the two women he said, with exaggerated humility, "Please accept this offering from one of your sons."

Bharat handed them a bundle of notes, much to their amazement. The women in turn insisted that the gang accept the hospitality of their home. Younger women from the family made tea for everyone, charpais were brought out for people to sit on and it seemed to Phoolan that half the village must be gathered around them, excited and fascinated by the presence of a baghi gang in their midst.

Stories and legends of baghis abound in the area. They are both feared and idolized. Scores of Hindi films have been made about them, enhancing the romantic rebel image they project, songs have been written describing their exploits and endless stories are told about particular bandit leaders. They are an intrinsic part of both myth and reality in the Chambal Valley. Vikram Mallah, having grown up in the ravines, was proud to have been integrated into this tradition and the role he played in this respect had become a

fundamental part of his nature. Phoolan says he called himself "Vikram Singh *Mastana*", projecting himself as a man already satisfied by all earthly desires and therefore able to give rather than to take.

That day, in the village of Asta, he was the star of the show. Having removed the bullets, he let young boys play with his rifle, much to everyone's amusement. He discussed problems of water and land, crops, pesticides and fertilizers with the farmers who sat around him. He visited the village temple, a small primitive shrine painted white with limestone, where he placed a gold chain round the statue of Vishnu, god of preservation. He distributed money to many in the village. A young bride-to-be was presented to him and he gave her another gold chain. The village had taken on the atmosphere of a mela (a festival), with hordes of children and young men accompanying Vikram Mallah and his gang through the streets.

Phoolan Devi observed all this from her inconspicuous position among them. Few spoke to her but there was no hostility in their attitude.

When they left the village, almost three hours later, they stopped once again at the hut of the two old women. The older of the two blessed Vikram Mallah by putting a streak of yellow across his forehead and offering him two rupees, a token of gratitude which he accepted graciously, bending down to touch her feet. Phoolan Devi was impressed.

All dacoit gangs throughout history have had to rely on a network of social support from villages around which they live and operate. Without this, they could not survive. The legendary Mansingh, who was born just before the turn of the last century, in 1896, is the example providing modern times' link with an age-old tradition. His father was a small farmer and a moneylender in the village of Khare Rathore, in the district of Agra in Uttar Pradesh. It is said that he had contacts with local baghi gangs and did "business" with them but in such a clandestine fashion that the authorities were never able to collect any evidence against him. In those days, rebel gangs were also engaged in a fight against the

Empire and the British, so wielded an enormous amount of social support. The family belonged to a line of Tomar Rajputs who had traditionally opposed state power from the days of the Moghul Empire, and the British merely represented a different race of invaders.

Being a moneylender, Mansingh's father, Bihari Singh, was a powerful man in the village but also feared and disliked by those who found themselves in his debt. The Brahmin landowners in the village, who were of a higher caste but lacked his power, decided to cut him down to size in order to re-establish their own authority. They sided with his enemies and tried to involve the British authorities, who began to investigate various aspects of his life and obvious wealth, infuriating the whole family.

The final straw was when the Brahmins paid a carpenter in the village, a man called Chhidda whose home had been plundered by dacoits over some personal vendetta, to indict Bihari Singh and allege his involvement with the robbery in a court of law. Efforts to cajole Chhidda, to prevent him from making false statements, proved futile. So on 30 July 1928, Mansingh, eager to defend his father's reputation, attacked one of Chhidda's relatives, triggering a caste war between Brahmins and Thakurs in the village. Several were killed, houses were burnt and granaries were ransacked, until eventually the authorities stepped in and arrested Mansingh. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. At the time he had four sons, all of whom absconded on his arrest because of their involvement in the violence that had erupted in the village.

By the time Mansingh was released from Agra Central Jail, in March 1939, he was deeply embittered. Two of his sons had been killed because of the same village feud and the other two had taken refuge in the ravines, afraid to even visit their mother. He wanted revenge, and his wife Rukhmini encouraged him by speaking of the tyranny they had all been subjected to after his arrest by the Brahmins in the village under the leadership of a landowner called Tulfiram. Mansingh decided to look for his two surviving sons and to hit back at his enemies. It is precisely what he did. From 1939 to 1955, when he was shot dead in a police encounter, he unleashed a

reign of complete terror throughout the Chambal Valley, wiping out not only Tulfiram but anyone connected with him. A large number of people were killed, villages looted and crops burnt, and Brahmin dominance in the area was destroyed.

After his death, Thakur gangs had come to prominence, displacing the power of Brahmins. In the same way, by the late 1970s or early 1980s, people like Vikram Mallah had shifted power from the Thakurs to the Sudras. It was the first time in history that the lowest of castes had begun to pick up sten guns in defence of their immediate interests. Mansingh remained a legendary hero throughout baghi folklore and many tried to match his reputation.

Writing about Mansingh in the *Indian Police Journal*, M. Radhakrishnan commented:

> Taking advantage of the relaxed conditions after 1947, Mansingh boldly returned to his village. It was certainly the triumphant return of a man who was feared for his strength and therefore obeyed without question. His father had died, and with Newab Singh (his son) in hiding, he took the lead in family affairs. With the help of loot that he had acquired in preceding years, he built a magnificent house upon a mound in a strategic place which commanded the only approach to the village. In his usual blustering way he established prestige for himself as a powerful man in the village. The villagers looked up to him as a friend and a guide and had their disputes settled by him. The poor received generous help from him and the legend about his charities and lavish gifts spread far and wide.
>
> Stories were told of him in voices of admiration of how he helped good causes, killed informers and policemen only when pursued, attacked only men who had money to spare, respected pious *Brahmins* who gave him blessings, and occasionally coerced *zamindars* (landowners) to contribute to desirable objects. His admirers often remarked that he represented the high watermark of dacoity nobly practised.

Officers of the Revenue, Customs, and Education Departments could run into him without fear. He could join marriage celebrations attended by hundreds of people. He had no private vices. Another reason which attracted the public towards him was Mansingh's deep religiousness. Not a day passed without his offering worship to his deities. It might be thought that his religious devotion was at variance with his general disposition. No man is all of a piece. Mansingh was no exception. He was as devoted a believer in God as anyone, but he certainly did not believe that a dacoit was outside God's tolerance.

An Indian journalist, Mr Bhaduri, who wrote a book called *Chambal – The Valley of Terror*, records this about Mansingh:

> The police records on Mansingh weighed a ton. The government had spent about a *crore* of rupees in its operation against him. During his life of banditry, Mansingh had committed 185 murders, 1,102 dacoities, and had collected over Rs 50 *lakhs* as ransom from relatives of kidnapped persons. In the 80 encounters with him after 1954, the police had lost 32 of its men and Mansingh 15.

When Mansingh was finally shot dead in an encounter with the police at Kakran-ka-pura near Bhind, on 25 May 1955, several government officials, including Nehru who was then Prime Minister, sent congratulatory telegrams to the State Government.

In her diary, Phoolan was to say:

"To Vikram a mention of the police was anathema. At the sight of a police patrol, he would attack like a tiger, never retreating. After a fierce battle of four hours or more, when he saw that he was being overpowered by them and there was no chance of victory, he would give the signal to run. We would run a minimum distance of 20 kos in a night. Whenever there was pressure from the police we would be on the run. Vikram was clever. He would commit three dacoities in a night and then lead the police quite a dance. He would send threatening letters to the police saying 'Fools! If you have

sucked at your mother's breast, come into the open battlefield. Why do you harass the innocent and the poor, beat them and put them in prison? Beat us. We are the "criminals" you seek.'

"He respected women and would touch the feet of any woman he met on his travels, sometimes giving money and asking all his members to contribute. He would say that he was Vikram Singh Mastana, and while he was alive, all the women of the area could move around freely without fear. No one would dare touch them since he was their protector. He was a law unto himself.

"He would go into villages to resolve minor disputes and complaints. He always warned the villagers against making a complaint at the police station, since no one there would pay any heed to them. The villagers respected his judgement."

Vikram Mallah, like many other bandit leaders, had styled himself on the legendary Mansingh. Unlike Babu Singh Gujar, whose capacity for cruelty and greed had made people fear and dislike him, Vikram wanted to gain a reputation that would enhance his own self-image. He wanted to represent the tradition that had nurtured his own ambition, not merely for the sake of power and wealth but in order to fulfil an inner need. Like Mansingh, he was religious to the point of being deeply superstitious. His public show of respect for women and his opposition to alcohol also indicate that he had planned to model his life on the man he referred to as a Dau – the local term of respect for an old and saintly man.

Talking to Moola one day in Gwalior, I said I had read Phoolan's statement to the police, recorded on the day she surrendered in February 1983, and that in it she projected Vikram Mallah as merely her captor, the lover imposed on her through the force of circumstance. I asked if this was true. Her face turned sad and silent and I added that, from all I had heard and learnt, I felt the man had been unique in many ways. I was surprised to see Phoolan Devi's mother shedding tears over her daughter's dead lover.

She took me to an inner room where she unlocked a steel cupboard, almost hidden behind a woodpile. From it she drew out a parcel, a framed photograph wrapped in white muslin and then wrapped again in brown paper to keep the cloth clean. She undid

the package with great care and showed me a black-and-white photograph of Vikram Mallah – a police shot of his dead body – saying: "That's the only picture that exists." She was still crying and, watching her grief, I realized how important Vikram Mallah must have been to Phoolan Devi.

After cups of tea and several cigarettes, I asked Moola to tell me something about the man. She told me of an incident that had alarmed her at the time but now made her laugh. Vikram, she told me, had hijacked a tractor from a farmer in a neighbouring village and had driven into Gorha Ka Purwa in broad daylight. He had come to give them news of Phoolan Devi and pay them a visit, as he put it, in the hope that they would accept him as their son-in-law. At first Moola had been shocked and asked how Phoolan could marry anyone when, in theory, she was already married. Vikram had laughed and told her that people who lived close to the earth did not need the ritual of law. In the eyes of God, he was her husband. In fact he had come to give, not to demand dowry payments as Puttilal had. He had risked capture to make his peace with her family and, saying this, he had handed her 5000 rupees. She had never met a man like him, she told me.

I asked if I could take a picture of the photograph and she agreed, unlocking the cupboard once again and unwrapping the bundle of muslin and paper with the care befitting a delicate and precious object of great value.

10

The Gang

OVER THE SPACE of a few months, Phoolan Devi was integrated into the gang and word spread through the ravines that she had become Vikram Mallah's mistress. Vikram was married but, because of the life he had chosen to lead, he rarely saw his wife and son who now lived with her parents, in his father-in-law's village. He sent them money whenever he could but didn't seem to miss the life he had left behind.

Recalling that time, Phoolan Devi said in her statement to the police:

"When my home was raided, my name attributed to their crimes, they were very happy that now I was also 'wanted' like them.

"We met the gang of Baba Ghanshyam, whose members Vijay Singh Padri and Chhatrasal Singh Pandi were related to Thakur Phool Singh who had once stood bail for me. He had instructed these people to get me out of the gang. He came to fetch me himself but as I was getting ready to go, Vikram Mallah shouted to say that I would be killed if I tried to leave. He was willing to offer gold and silver to Phool Singh in return for me. He also ordered that Phool Singh be compensated for the bail money to the tune of 25,000 rupees. After having handed over this money, Ghanshyam left the gang because he believed that they would be betrayed because of me.

"There were now seven dacoits in Vikram Mallah's gang. The rest had all gone away with Ghanshyam. Vikram gave me a gun and I became his mistress and learnt to fire. Vikram's gang consisted of Bharat Singh, Madho Singh, Vareylal, Guddi alias Kali Charan, Dharamjit and me."

The day Thakur Phool Singh had turned up at the camp, Phoolan Devi told me later, was the turning-point in her relationship with Vikram Mallah. Till then she had considered herself his prisoner, accepting her fate and being grateful for the fact that he was far better than any other man she had been forced to live with.

After Ghanshyam's gang had teamed up with them temporarily, there were tensions. Ghanshyam was related to Malkhan Singh, the most powerful dacoit leader in the valley at the time. Although they came from the caste of Mirdhas, who ranked lower than Thakurs, Malkhan considered himself way above Sudras and Mallahs. Ghanshyam felt much the same way and didn't approve of Phoolan Devi's presence in the gang. He had personal respect and affection for Vikram Mallah but thought his killing of Babu Singh Gujar had been reckless and would make them all vulnerable in relation to other Thakur gangs. Besides, he had promised Thakur Phool Singh that he would find Phoolan Devi so that the money he had put up for her bail would be protected, Phoolan's father being in no position to pay his debt to the man who had befriended him.

Phoolan says that when Thakur Phool Singh arrived she had been cooking for the combined gangs of Vikram Mallah and Ghanshyam. The camp was on raised ground, high up on a ravine edge, so she had spotted him, accompanied by the two men from Ghanshyam's gang who were related to him, almost half an hour before they reached the camp. Vikram Mallah had been playing cards when she told him they were approaching. He had not seemed in the least perturbed, continued to concentrate on his hand, and she recalls feeling offended by his apparent lack of interest.

Her own mind had been in turmoil. At first she had thought Phool Singh's interest in returning her to her family was out of friendship to her father but Vikram had retorted, just the night before, that all "the Thakur" wanted was his money intact. He was right, she decided. If she returned to her village she knew she would soon be arrested, initially for jumping bail and after that, who could tell what other charges might follow? She had considered the options facing her all night and all day and had come to the

conclusion that she had nothing to gain by returning to her parents' home. She also knew that she would not be making any of the decisions. The men involved would protect their own interests and come to their own arrangement.

Ghanshyam rose to greet Thakur Phool Singh and took him straight to Vikram Mallah, who was still engrossed in his game of cards. The radio was on so she could not hear what they were saying. When she saw the old man walking towards her, she got up and went forward to touch his feet.

"Come," he said with authority, "we are going."

Phoolan Devi says she moved towards her bundle of belongings in a daze, thinking Vikram Mallah had decided to let her go. She had felt panic.

But then he shouted out to her, "If you attempt to leave, I will kill you."

She realized in an instant that this was his way of protecting her from having to say anything or make any decisions. He had made the choice. When she heard him instructing Bharat to pay Thakur Phool Singh her bail money, she says she felt as if he had just paid a bride-price for her. That night she felt like his wife, elated by his gesture of commitment, thanking Durga for the unexpected happiness she had found. Vikram, she recalls, was unusually quiet.

The next morning Ghanshyam announced that he was moving on. Almost all the Thakurs and Gujars in the gang left with him and Vikram's gang was reduced to seven, including Phoolan Devi.

Speaking of these days she says:

"Vikram and I slept away from the gang but there were always two guards on duty, doing a two-hour shift, one for Vikram and me and another guarding the gang.

"He was very fond of me and spent a lot of time teaching me how to fire and how to run. He said the ability to run was very important when the police were after you! We lived in a relaxed atmosphere, in cameraderie, and there were no quarrels or jealousies in the gang. He always considered my needs. When we walked through the behad (the ravines) hungry and thirsty, he would give me water

first. He would insist that I eat even when I said I was not hungry. When he washed his clothes he would wash mine too. He even plaited my hair before I cut it short.

"Whenever we had an encounter with the police and shots were fired, Vikram would hold my hand and reassure me that all was well, that I should not be afraid since he was with me. He would then shout and abuse the police saying, 'Remember, you police dogs, Vikram Mallah is not alone. I have with me the reincarnation of Putli Bai, so why do you court death?'"

Putli Bai remains one of the most famous and revered figures in the history of rural banditry. She too had been called "Bandit Queen" by police, politicians and pressmen alike throughout the 1950s, attracting a great deal of public attention during those early years of independence from British rule. Born into a Muslim family of prostitutes in Agra, she first acquired fame as a dancer. Her mother, Ashgari, ran a lucrative business – a traditional Nauchghar – a brothel of dancing girls, and Putli was among the best, drawing huge crowds and many clients who travelled from all over the state to attend Ashgari's nightly Mahfil (gathering). Putli had been trained by skilled "gurus" as a child and her mother employed some of the best musicians in town. She became so famous in Agra that rich landowners and other wealthy people from surrounding villages and small towns hired her on special occasions, to entertain their guests.

One day she was invited to the princely state of Dholpur, now in Rajastan, to dance at the wedding of a rich landlord's son. It was a lavish occasion and hundreds of guests had travelled from neighbouring villages. The celebrations carried on into the early hours of the morning, with liquor and money in abundance. People say that so much money was thrown at Putli, in appreciation of her performance, that she was literally dancing on money! This may or may not be true but it is what people say today.

Then shots rang out. As drunken guests scattered in all directions, probably thinking that a dacoit gang had come to raid the wedding party for money and jewellery, which was a frequent risk, there was the sound of many horses. In those days, it was

common for gangs to move on horseback, as the British had done. Later, horses were abandoned and both police and dacoits travelled by foot, making themselves less conspicuous and better able to negotiate the interior of the ravines, where thick sandy ridges broke the skyline but would have crumbled under the weight of a horse.

It was indeed the most notorious dacoit gang of the time, led by a tall, extremely good-looking Muslim bandit leader who called himself Sultan. Unknown to Putli, he had seen her dance in Agra and had fallen in love with her, or so he thought. From all accounts, Sultan was a strange and convoluted man who essentially had no respect for women. He thought they represented evil temptation and brought bad luck. In many ways he despised his own desire, seeing it as a weakness he ought to conquer. Yet the fact that Putli danced in a brothel incensed him because he wanted her for himself and could not stand the thought of other men in casual contact with her every day. Having heard of the wedding in Dholpur, he had decided to kidnap her.

Their relationship was never peaceful and, although Putli escaped on at least two occasions, she eventually chose to return, bored and violated by the life she led in her mother's brothel in Agra. During the time they were together, Sultan and Putli had a child. She named her daughter Tanno and within months had her sent to Ashgari in Agra, unable to cope with a baby in the ravines.

Sultan was killed in an encounter with the police, leaving Putli free to join up with Kalyan Singh, alias Kalla, to whom she had always been attracted. The Kalla–Putli gang became one of the most feared and hunted of all gangs operating in the Chambal Valley in the 1950s, second only to the gang of Mansingh. After Mansingh's death, his lieutenants, "Roopa", Rooplal Sharma, and Lakhan, nicknamed "Lakhan the Terrible", were considered to be of secondary importance in police circles.

Putli became known as the "Bandit Queen" and even in her lifetime an enormous legend grew around her. Stories of her exploits were told and retold, songs were written about her life, and villagers who claimed to have seen her took pride in describing

every little detail they could remember of their encounter with the "reincarnation of Kali".

After Putli was injured in a gun battle with the police one day, her left arm was amputated at the elbow by a village doctor. During the period of her recovery, Kalla ensured that on each raid one of his men dressed as a woman, in a sari, in order to flout police rumours that she had been killed. Newspaper reports stated there had been a long trail of blood which made it unlikely that she had survived. The constable who claimed to have shot her was on the verge of being promoted or decorated.

A few months later, Putli was seen in villages again, wielding a rifle, held steady with the stub of her left arm, her aim still accurate. A police constable, injured in a gun battle, stated that he had been shot by Putli, whom he recognized, and added that she had lost half her left arm, confirming rumours that she was still alive.

On 23 January 1958, Putli was shot dead, trying to escape a police ambush by crossing the Kunwari River, which runs parallel to the Chambal. She was twenty-nine. Her body was dragged to the left bank of the river and, I was told, villagers still pray at that spot.

When I spoke to senior policemen later, I was shown a police report written soon after her death which stated:

> In the villages of Central India, people will sing folk songs for years about the exploits of a willowy dancing girl who became a dacoit, and terrorized the countryside with murder and robbery. Death has wiped out our scores against her. Her cruelty and ruthlessness will be forgotten, but what will be remembered is the fearless courage of this woman, who endured much and suffered much, but lived her own life as the gang leader of a desperate band of outlaws. This brave but misguided woman lived her life without regret, dancing girl, dacoit, nurse, she had drunk life to the dregs within the short period of 29 years.

I also learned that when the police searched her rucksack, they had found a half-empty bottle of rum and a copy of the Koran.

Being Muslim, Putli was excluded from the Hindu caste

structure, whereas Phoolan was trapped by it. The one thing they had in common is that they both belonged to the class that was powerless at the time. After 1947, when Pakistan was created, Muslims who remained in India had become "a minority", lacking their former influence and power; low-caste Hindus have never commanded any authority throughout history.

11

Bad Omens

AT THE TIME when Vikram Mallah killed Babu Singh Gujar, two other leading members of the gang, Sri Ram and Lala Ram, were serving a term of imprisonment on charges of theft. Sri Ram was the elder of the two Thakur brothers and Vikram, who had known and admired him for many years, referred to him as his "guru". As a Mallah, recruited into a gang dominated by Gujars and Thakurs, Vikram's rise to prominence had been exceptional. During the early years of his apprenticeship, Sri Ram had apparently been protective and supportive of Vikram's interests, winning his affection and loyalty. Now that Babu Singh was dead, Vikram Mallah was anxious not to antagonize Sri Ram, who would eventually rejoin the gang on his release from prison. With this in mind, he had already sent Sri Ram a written message, explaining the circumstances in which Babu Singh had been killed, telling him about Phoolan Devi and asking if she could remain with the gang as his woman. Sri Ram had responded by sending his "blessings" from prison, much to Vikram's relief.

Phoolan Devi says in her diary: "For some months we lived in peace until we received a letter from Sri Ram. He complained, saying now that Vikram had become leader of a large gang he had forgotten all about them. 'Will you let me rot in jail all my life?' he had written. 'My young granddaughter sits in the village unmarried: shame on you for not even trying to find her a husband.' On reading this, Vikram called all the gang together and said, 'Brothers, we must all help. Next time, the money from the work we do will not be distributed. It will be used for the marriage of Thakur Sahib's granddaughter.'

"Vikram had a plan. One evening, we got ready and put up a road block on the Kanpur–Agra highway. We stopped a truck and told the driver we were policemen and that we had information that his truck carried narcotics. We said we had a search warrant. In this way we looted twenty-six trucks between 6.30 p.m. and 10 p.m. Since we were all dressed as policemen, no one suspected us. Some of us were dressed as SPs, some as TIs and some as thanedars.

"Vikram then wrote a letter to the police, addressed to the SP, saying: 'You are all dogs! Your father Vikram Mallah has looted these twenty-six trucks. Don't put the blame on poor, innocent people. Don't implicate anyone falsely. Come and look for Vikram Mallah and Phoolan Devi.' Sticking the note on one of the trucks – all the tyres had been deflated – we left. I remember, that day we walked 30 kos and arrived at the house of Sri Ram's daughter at 4 a.m.

"Vikram asked what caste her daughter could marry into and she said they were Mayo Thakurs and could only marry into the Chaurasi caste. Having gathered the information, we moved on again, crossing the Jamuna at 6 a.m. It was bitterly cold and difficult to keep walking. However, by 10 a.m. we arrived at a village called Nibhana. It was a large village and the pradhan of the village was a very rich man. Vikram summoned him and asked him how many sons he had. He said he had two, the older being married and the younger studying in Class 12. Vikram said, 'Don't be frightened; ask your younger son to come here.' When the boy was brought, Vikram asked him to relax and said that from that day he had been accepted as the son-in-law of a 'good family'!

"In front of many villagers, Vikram placed 85,000 rupees in his hands and distributed the loot from the trucks among the villagers. Some received watches, some gold chains, some rings. Then Vikram warned them not to say anything to the police, to avoid being implicated in the crime. He said they should go to the village of Jagaiyyapur in Sikandra thana in order to perform the ceremony and asked when they could go. They said they would go in the month of Chait, in spring, and solemnize the marriage. So, Sri

Ram's granddaughter later married the pradhan's son. We had a meal with the villagers and then went off into the jungle."

Bizarre as it may sound, the practice of arranging marriages in such a way is not uncommon in the world of bandits. In the 1940s, for instance, Mansingh's niece was married to the son of a wealthy landowner in similar circumstances. A photograph of the couple still decorates the family home in Khare Rathore, where his only surviving son, Tehsildar Singh, now lives.

"Then, after two or three months, there was another letter from Sri Ram. This time he pleaded with Vikram to get him released on bail, saying that he could not suffer in jail any more and would rather commit suicide. Again, Vikram committed several dacoities in a frantic bid to get enough money together for his bail. There were six cases against Sri Ram in Kanpur and two in Orai. The bail for Kanpur was 30,000 rupees and it was 14,000 for the charges he faced in Orai. Finally, when Sri Ram was freed he did not go home because he feared the police might re-arrest him but came straight to us in the jungle. It was the month of Baisakh [the middle of the rainy season].

"When Sri Ram met Vikram he said, 'So, you've become famous now. Sophisticated weapons, a big gang, even a mistress! Not bad at all.' Vikram replied, 'Guruji, I hope I have not offended you in any way. I have always sought your permission before doing anything.' Then, taking his rifle off his shoulder, he handed it to Sri Ram and said, 'Thakur sahib, here is your gun. It is good to see you back among us.' Sri Ram asked where I was and said, 'Come on, introduce her to me.'

"Vikram then came to call me, saying that his guru had arrived and I must meet him and get his blessings. So I got up from where I had been resting and went towards the gathering. I asked Vikram which one was his 'guru', because there were three or four strange faces, and he indicated a short man sitting on the well-made bed. I went forward to touch his feet, but he caught my hand and told me to sit beside him saying, 'Where are you going? I have been visualizing this meeting while I languished in jail.'"

Despite her discomfort, Phoolan says, for Vikram's sake she

decided to play the role that was expected of her. She talked of their experiences in recent exploits, while Sri Ram recounted anecdotes from prison. Lala Ram was a puny-looking young man who obviously lived in his brother's shadow and said little.

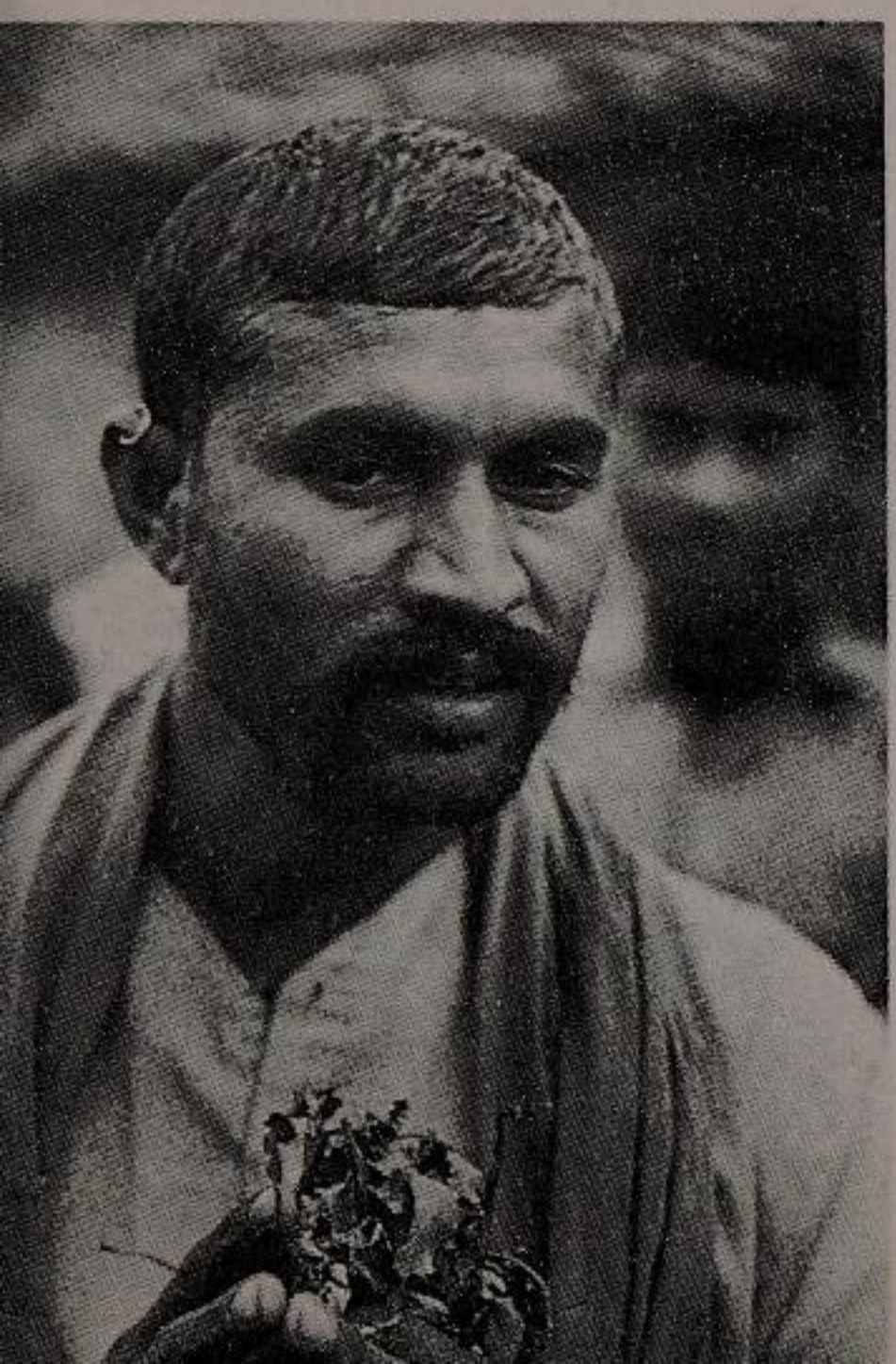
Phoolan Devi took an instant dislike to Sri Ram and felt contempt for his brother whom she judged to be weak and sly. Sri Ram's manner of speaking and dealing with those around him reminded her of Babu Singh and she noticed that, within hours, he had begun to assert his authority and order other members of the gang around, asking for more tea, enquiring about arrangements for food and missing no opportunity to punctuate his conversation with comments she found offensive. Feeling annoyed and resentful, she walked away and joined Bharat Singh who was on guard duty some distance from the camp.

Bharat shared her dislike of Sri Ram. He told her he had warned Vikram to keep away from him, that he was not to be trusted and would create disharmony in the gang; but Vikram had known him since his teenage years, as a casual "runner" for the gang, and felt a curious loyalty towards Sri Ram that was hard to question. Reassured by the moral support she had been given by his closest friend in the gang, Phoolan Devi decided to discuss the matter with Vikram Mallah as soon as the opportunity arose. She was sure she could influence him. He had come to trust her instincts and often considered her opinions before making serious decisions.

This was not because her experience of life in the ravines could match his but because he had learnt to accept her interpretation of "signs" and "symbols", which he believed were messages from the supernatural, from God. The importance given to such instincts, based on the observation of ordinary daily events, was a timeless component of his culture. In his book *The Yellow Scarf*, Sir Francis Tuker observes, recalling the times of "Thuggee" Sleeman:

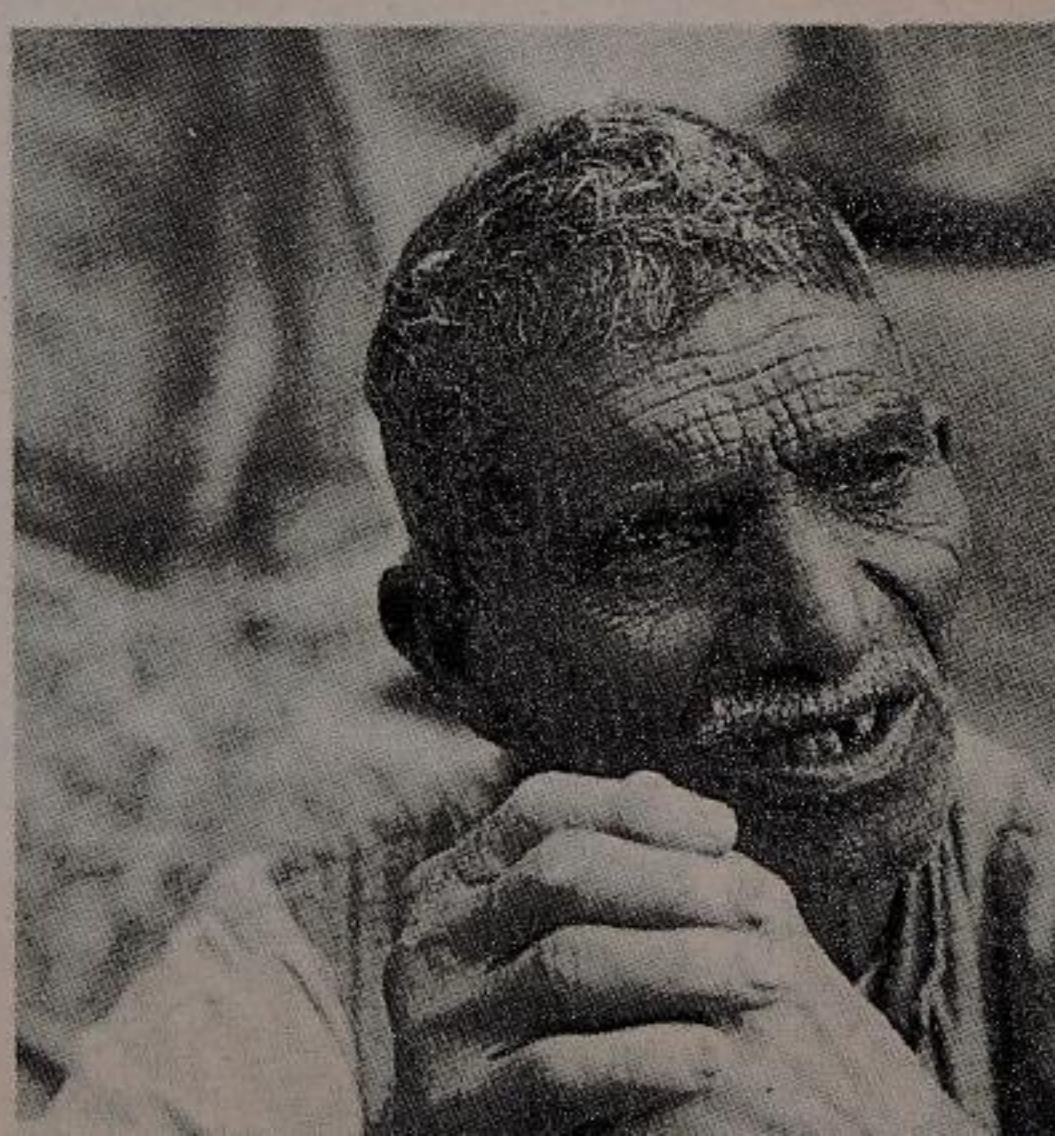
> Omens were taken from the head of a dead sheep, the convulsive movements of mouth and nostrils being noted as propitious or not when a fluid was poured on them. Before they actually left, some of the gang would proceed in the

Phoolan Devi with members of her family on the eve of her surrender at the Irrigation Rest House, Inguie, Madhya Pradesh, 11 February 1983. From right to left: Phoolan Devi, Phoolan's mother, Moola, and sister, Rukhmini. (*Jagdish Yadav*).
Inset: Phoolan Devi, Gwalior, 1986. (*Mala Sen*)



Phoolan Devi's cousin, Maiyadin.
(Jagdish Yadav)

Phoolan Devi's father, Devideen.
(*Jagdish Yadav*)

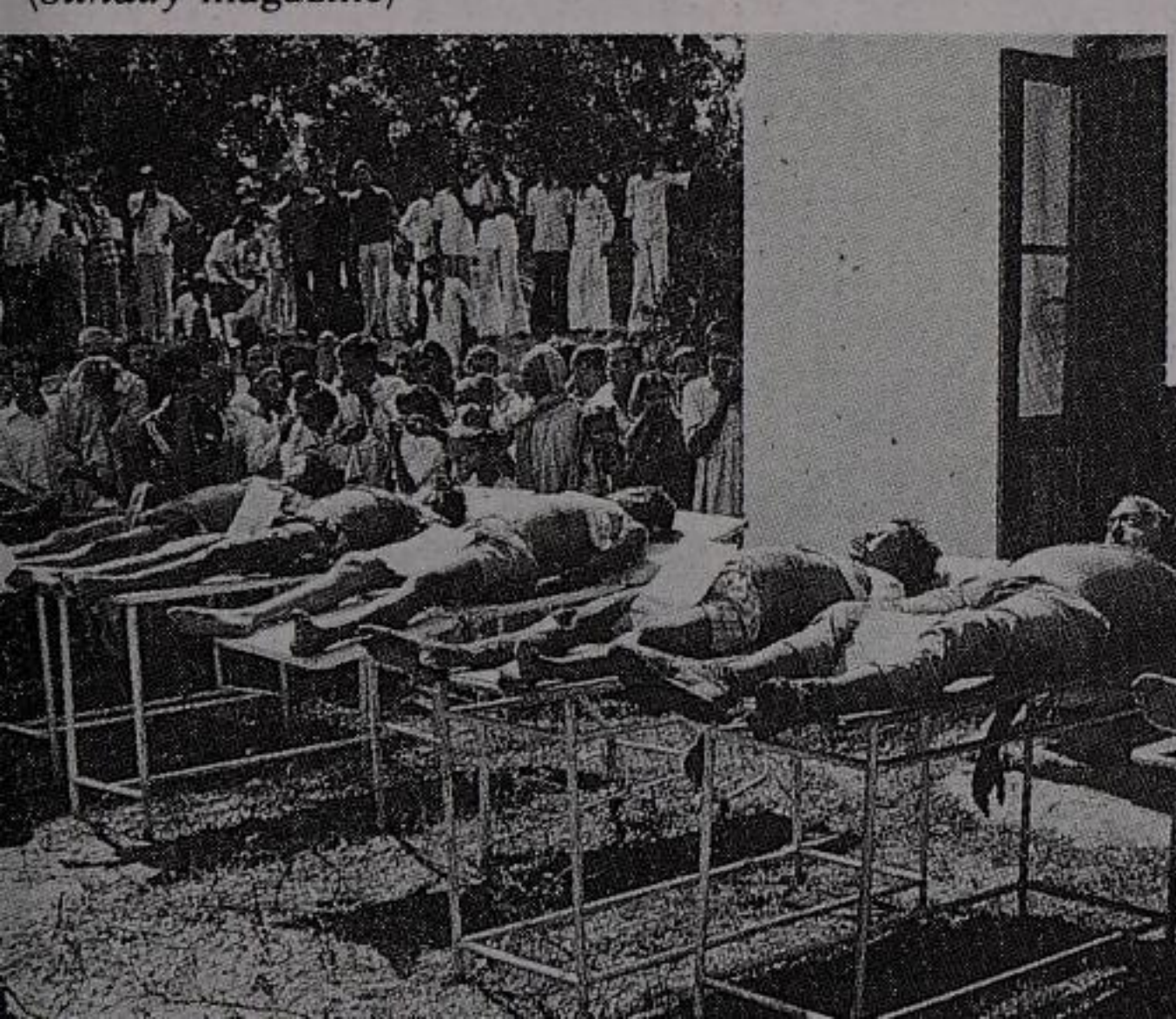


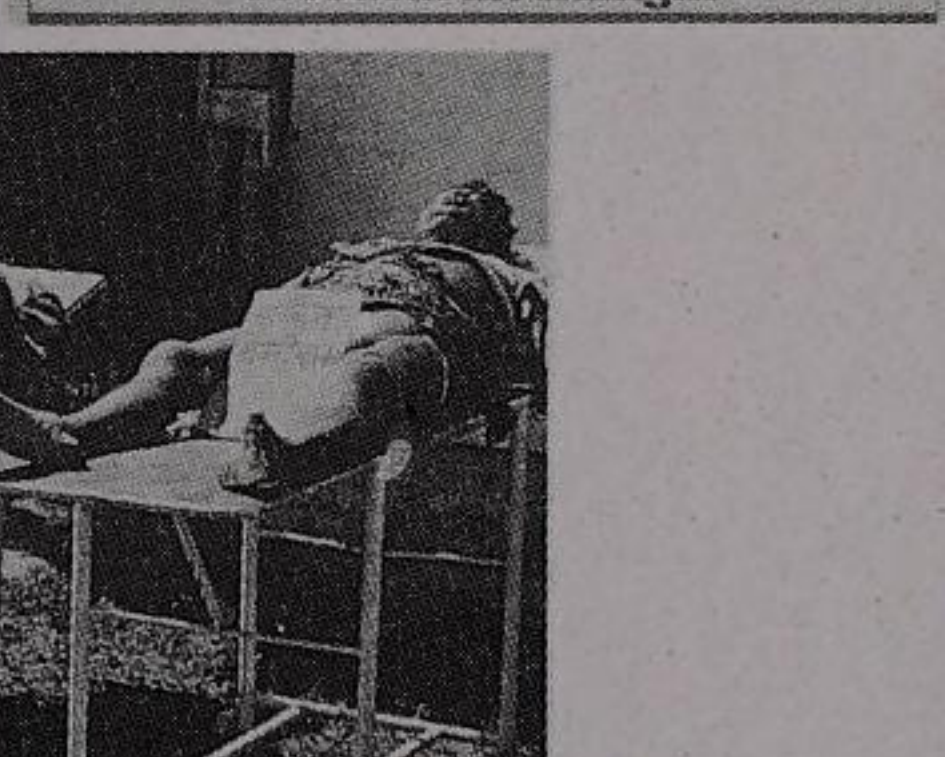
Phoolan Devi's home in the village of Gorha Ka Purwa. Moola and her youngest daughter, Munni, are in the foreground. (*Yagdish Yadav*)
Inset: Rukhmini, Moola and a village woman bathing in the Jamuna river, 1986. (*Mala Sen*)

A typical ravine village, virtually hidden from sight. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

Vikram Mallah, Phoolan Devi's lover, shot dead in August 1980 by Sri Ram Singh and Lala Ram Singh. (*Mala Sen, from a police photograph*)

The corpses of Pan Singh Tomar's gang on display after the police "encounter" in which they were shot dead in 1981. (*Prashant Panjiar*)
Inset: cover of *Sunday* magazine, March 1981, showing the identikit photo of Phoolan Devi circulated by police after the Behmai massacre, and the former Asian Games gold medal winner, Pan Singh Tomar. (*Sunday* magazine)




SUNDAY

WANTED

DEAD OR ALIVE

UP's Fascinating Dacoit Queen Phoolan Devi

Chambal's "Emperor" Malkhan Singh, the Robin Hood of the '80s

Pan Singh Tomar, who once represented India in the Asian Games

How these three have become terrors and legends

EXCLUSIVE EXTRACT
FROM THE FIFTH HORSEMAN
By Collins and Lapierre, authors of
Freedom at Midnight

Malkan Singh, the Robin Hood of the Ravines, adulated by villagers in Bilao on the way to his surrender at Bhind in June 1982. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

A local politician (left, dressed in white), Malkan Singh (centre) and Rajendra Chaturvedi, architect of the 1982–83 surrenders (right), pose for the cameras on their way to Bhind in June 1982. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

On the same night in June 1982, dacoit gangs carried out revenge killings in the villages of Dastampur and Rampura. V. P. Singh (right), then Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, with his hand on the shoulder of the President of India, Giani Zail Singh, at the funeral for those killed in the massacre at Dastampur (1982). (*Prashant Panjiar*)

The funeral pyre at Rampura in Uttar Pradesh. *(Prashant Panjiar)*
Inset: Muslim, who conducted the massacre of the villagers at Dastampur in revenge for the betrayal of his cousin, Baba Mustaqeem. *(Prashant Panjiar)*

A member of Ganshyam's gang emerging from cover in the ravines to lead Rajendra Chaturvedi to their camp. Ganshyam was his sole link with Phoolan Devi. (*Prashant Panjiar*). *Inset:* Baba Ganshyam (*Prashant Panjiar*)

Phoolan Devi with members of her gang on the way to the surrender ceremony. (*Yagdish Yadav*)

Police patrol in the ravines. (*Prashant Panjiar*)
Inset: Member of the Uttar Pradesh police (PAC) waiting to ambush a dacoit gang. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

The legendary Bandit King, "Dau" Mansingh, shot dead by police in an "encounter" in 1956. (© *Prashant Panjiar*). *Inset:* Mansingh's niece on the day of her wedding to the son of a wealthy village landowner in the 1940s. (© *Prashant Panjiar*)

Tehsildar Singh, son of Mansingh, with his granddaughter, in their ancestral village of Kahre Rathor. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

direction they were to take to observe the flight of the birds and listen to the chirping of lizards. If the omens were ill, then they did the same in the other direction and chose the roads that portended the greatest success.

The following were favourable signs: a lizard chirping and a crow making a noise on a living tree on the left. A tiger appearing was deemed rather a good sign. The noise of a partridge on the right side denoted that they would meet with good booty on the very spot and there accordingly they would halt.

These betokened misfortune: a hare or a snake crossing the road before them: a crow sitting and making a noise on a rock or a dead tree; an ass braying while sitting; an owl screeching; the noise of a single jackal. If a dog should carry off the head of a sheep which they had sacrificed, it betokened no booty for many years.

As omens were also watched during the campaign itself, the occasional victim has owed his life all unwittingly to an adverse omen. It is unlucky to murder a female or a person of the Kamala caste, metal workers, carpenters, washermen, vagrants, stone-cutters, pot-makers and lepers, also the blind and mutilated or a man driving a cow or female goat. Many a party of travellers have owed their lives to one of these humble souls being among them. There was no difference made between rich and poor, for this was a religious duty and the Thug killed because he was instructed to kill by Kali; nevertheless there would be some disappointment when, for instance, the gang went to the trouble of strangling a humble person whose bag contained nothing but the tools of his trade or a cooking-pot.

Although dacoit gangs of this century did not claim to be waging a religious crusade as the Thugs of the past had done, many aspects of their beliefs are similar. The goddess Kali, also known as Durga Mata, Mata, Bajrang Devi, Mahadevi, Sitla Mata and numerous other manifestations, is still the most widely worshipped deity of

all. The omens that signal good or evil have changed little and are still a strong influence on many. Phoolan Devi was no exception.

That night, sitting cross-legged beside Vikram who was lying down, tired by the day's events, she says she felt tense and insecure, almost afraid. She said to him of the brothers, "They will bring us bad luck. Don't let them join the gang." Vikram reminded her that it was their gang as much as his and said he didn't expect her to understand because she hadn't been with them at the time. He remained silent through the rest of her arguments, keeping his eyes shut. When she spoke of a crow she had seen on a dead tree while talking to Bharat, he was merely amused. Taking his silence to mean indifference, she finally said, almost in tears, "Look at the way he treated me!" Phoolan records his response in her diary:

"Vikram seemed to be angry with me and said, 'Phoolan, you must not behave so docile and demure. When Sri Ram caught you by the hand, why didn't you just slap his face? In future, if anyone touches you or even teases you, hit him and pick up your rifle.' I explained that I had not done anything because Vikram always referred to him as his 'guru'. I had not wanted to make him angry. 'Never mind me and what I say,' Vikram told me. 'Remember, always defend yourself.' He then said Sri Ram and Lala Ram would be leaving the next morning to visit their family. He had given Sri Ram 10,000 rupees. We were leaving for the jungles of Maheshpur, not far from the village where my husband and his family lived. Vikram asked me, as a joke, whether I wanted to visit my in-laws and kidnap Puttilal. I said it was not a bad idea, that an animal like him deserved some punishment.

"What Vikram had said preyed on my mind. It was true, I had always been subservient to men. I swore from that day onwards that I would learn to talk back and fight my own battles. The next day, after we had moved camp, I said to Vikram, 'Come on, let's go to my husband's house. I shall beat Puttilal with my own hands today.' Vikram called half the gang together and we left around noon, arriving at my husband's village at about 3 p.m.

"We went to his house and seized all the inmates. Vikram asked me to identify Puttilal but he was not among them. So we searched

for him inside the house and found him hiding in a room full of cattlefeed. One of our gang members, Bharat, caught him and dragged him to us. I gave vent to years of bottled-up frustration and anger. 'You brute, do you recognize me? Who am I to you?' Puttilal mistook me for a man and said he did not recognize me. So I abused him some more and said, 'Don't you know me? I am your wife Phoolan. You evil man! So you married three times, did you? Don't you remember how you tortured me?' I kept on hitting him. I was hysterical and sobbed, relating my story to the gang. 'I was only eleven,' I said, 'and he was as old as he is now! He would take his sadistic pleasures, frightening me to such an extent that I was physically ill all the time I was with him, but he showed me no mercy. And when I went for a few days' respite to my parents' house, he and his second wife started torturing me on my return. They would beat me mercilessly and make me go hungry for days.' All through this I was beating him black and blue, using the butt of my rifle, my hands, my feet.

"We tied up Puttilal and his wife Vidya and we left the village with them. I wanted to kill them in the vicinity of the Sikandra police station and leave a note that this would be the fate of any man who married two wives.

"When we were barely a mile from the police station, I changed my mind and decided not to kill them but to let them live to tell the tale. This time I beat them both, so much so that Puttilal lost two of his teeth and I broke his arms and legs, before leaving them there, tied together, with a letter to the daroga [police inspector], claiming responsibility for the act.

"Vikram was impressed and pleased, patting me on the back, saying, 'Where have you been hiding all this strength? I didn't know that you had it in you to do what you have just done. I know you will earn a name for yourself and be able to face your enemies like a true baghi!'

"We then crossed to the jungles of the Jamuna and in the morning got news that Sri Ram and Lala Ram were on the run from the police again and had been looking for us. They wanted to join the gang, as they feared the police and the courts and had no other

support. This time many people objected, saying they would cause a rift in the gang, that they were not trustworthy, but Vikram cut them short, saying if we didn't help them and lend support, who would? He sent two men to search for them, saying we would be in the jungles of Raipur for the next few days. It took them eight days to find us.'

12

Alliances and Conflicts Within

IN ADDITION TO the divisions and hostilities that exist within the Hindu caste structure, there has been considerable conflict between Hindus and Muslims in India for many centuries. Curiously, this is not reflected in what we know of the world of banditry, despite the prevailing conditions that fuel this enmity throughout the rest of society. Sleeman, writing about "The legendary origin of Thuggee", comes to the conclusion that:

> The true origin of Thuggee is shrouded in obscurity, but it is said to have sprung from the Sagartii, who contributed 8,000 horses to the army of Xerxes and are described by Herodotus in the VIIth book of his History.
>
> These people led a pastoral life; were originally of Persian descent and use that language; their dress is something betwixt the Persian and Pactyan; they have no offensive weapons either of iron or brass, except their daggers; their principal dependence in action is on cords made of twisted leather which they use in this manner: when they engage an enemy they throw these cords, having a noose at the extremity; if they entangle in these either horse or man they, without difficulty, put them to death.
>
> There is reason to believe that the descendants of these Sagartii accompanied a Mohamedan invader of India and settled in the neighbourhood of Delhi.
>
> The earliest authentic Indian historical notice of Thuggee is the statement in Zia-ud-Barni's history of Firoz Shah, written in 1356, that about AD 1290 a thousand Thugs

> were captured at Delhi but that the Sultan with misplaced clemency, refused to sanction their execution, shipped them off to Lakhnaut, and there let them loose. No wonder Bengal was to become a hot-bed of Thuggee in later years! This places the antiquity of Indian Thuggee over five hundred years before it was suppressed. The next mention of thugs refers to the reign of Akbar (1556–1605), when some five hundred were captured in the Etawah district, always notorious for crime.

Still notorious, Etawah borders the district of Jalaun in which Phoolan Devi was born.

Sir Francis Tuker, while recording Sleeman's work, adds his own comments and observes:

> Hindu and Muslim in India have for centuries been at enmity, the animosity stemming from the various Muslim conquests of India and the resulting oppression of the Hindus. The strangest aspect of the whole story of Thuggee is the complete burial of this hatchet among the members of the guild, the acceptance by Muslims of the Hindu deities as their spiritual patrons and of Hindu ritual to serve those patrons: on the other hand, the ignoring of all Hindu taboos within the gang. The two creeds mixed in this ghastly trade.

In addition to the migration of Muslims from the north and the Middle East, over the years tens of thousands of low-caste Hindus converted to Islam (as they did to Christianity in the south) to escape the oppression of the Hindu caste system, and today Muslims form a substantial "minority" in India, numbering some 100 million people out of a total population of 800 million.

Apart from Sri Ram, Vikram Mallah had been influenced by another dacoit leader, renowned for his ability to kidnap the sons and relatives of rich landowners and extract huge ransoms. In recent years, Vikram had begun to think that Baba Mustaqeem, as he was known throughout the valley, was more cunning and successful than all the other bandit chiefs put together. Mustaqeem

was Muslim but his band of men consisted of a mixture of Hindus, mostly of the lower castes, and men of his own faith. At the age of twenty-six, the age that Vikram Mallah was then, he had gained a reputation that ranked him second only to Malkhan Singh, the godfather of the gangs during the mid and late 1970s. With the return of Sri Ram imminent, Vikram wanted to expand his own power base through a wider alliance, so that the two Thakur brothers would not get the impression that he operated alone and was vulnerable to their whims. Despite his defence of his "guru", Vikram Mallah realized that much of what had been said against him was fundamentally true. Sri Ram and his brother were not to be trusted too much. If their return created problems, he wanted to have an alternative around which to rally a split gang. He had already seen the wisdom of Mustaqeem's perspective: kidnap-for-ransom was the safest and most lucrative way in which to operate. Raids on random villages sometimes delivered little and there was always the possibility of death. Many villagers in the region were armed and some chose to defend their property. He had already been shot once, in the leg, as a result of such resistance.

Mustaqeem's code was: "take money from the rich and buy the support of the poor". By contrast the Thakur gangs had a vested interest in establishing the dominance of their caste. Vikram Mallah, who came from a lower caste himself, had no such ambition. He saw no point in robbing his own caste of the little gold or money they might possess.

He discussed these ideas with Phoolan Devi, Bharat Singh and Madho Singh and all agreed that they should try and locate "Baba". Rumour had it that his gang was camping in the ravines just north of the Chambal River.

Vikram Mallah and Phoolan Devi set out with about half their gang and travelled north, towards Etawah. Vikram knew of villages where they could pick up news of Mustaqeem's whereabouts. It proved to be less difficult than he had expected and within a couple of days they found themselves following a scout to the Muslim leader's camp.

His gang was camped quite far from the river, in a clearing of

thorny shrub. Mustaqeem greeted Vikram warmly, embracing him on sight.

It took him a few seconds to weigh up the rest and turning to Vikram he said, "Have you gone mad? What are you doing with this woman? Have I taught you nothing?"

Phoolan Devi, shocked and humiliated by his response, sat at a distance from the men, trying not to show her resentment. She had grown used to the prejudice of men and did not react as Mustaqeem tried to impress upon her lover that women brought bad luck and that their presence in a baghi gang symbolized death.

Vikram had been good-humoured but firm in clarifying that he made his own decisions in that respect and had come to discuss "business". Much to Phoolan's discomfort, Vikram informed her that they would sleep there that night because he needed to discuss certain matters with Mustaqeem. She had no choice but to accept, having decided to keep as aloof as possible.

On the way back to their own camp, two days later, Vikram informed her that he had struck a deal. For larger raids the two gangs would combine: they would assist each other in the face of a common enemy; they would share equally the loot of combined raids, regardless of how many men each side brought to the operation. In addition Mustaqeem had given him some useful tips; information that would lead to successful pakars (kidnaps). Vikram was jubilant about the alliance he had struck – however short-lived it was to be for him personally. He now felt confident about taking on Sri Ram and Lala Ram on his own terms, having established connections outside their reach or influence. Baba Mustaqeem distrusted high-caste Hindus, and Thakurs in particular.

Within a day or two of this meeting, Sri Ram and his brother returned to join the gang. Phoolan records the events that followed:

"Vikram greeted them and handing over his rifle to Sri Ram, he put a red tilak on his forehead, saying 'Thakur Sahib, now take care of your gang. Treat everyone with respect. In the eyes of God we are all equal. Think of Phoolan as your daughter. Fate has been very unkind to her.'

"We all left the area together. In a very short time, Sri Ram showed us his true colours. He established his rights over the gang and would make them run his personal errands, including having his feet massaged and pressed by gang members after a hard day's walk.

"Gang members began protesting to Vikram, saying, 'Chief, he's causing trouble. He thinks of no one but himself. Who is he to us anyway?' They warned that many would not tolerate Sri Ram's behaviour for long and the gang would soon become fragmented. This worried Vikram, so he took Sri Ram aside and told him, 'All the men are turning hostile towards you; just be a little careful.' Sri Ram started behaving himself from then on and stopped ordering people around. We all thought he had changed.

"One day we arrived in the jungles of Hamirpur on the banks of the Betwa River. In the morning, we sent a message to the mukhiya [headman] of Dadri village, asking him to send us food and supplies. But he came himself to tell us that his granddaughter was getting married and he was delighted that we had come on such an auspicious occasion. He invited us all to join in the festivities. Vikram selected five men whom he trusted from the gang, under the leadership of Bharat, and sent them to join the celebrations, warning them not to drink too much or cause any trouble in the village. He gave him 5000 rupees and a gold chain to be presented to the bride.

"These people had barely left when there was another invitation from a neighbouring village, for the wedding of the daughter of a poor peasant. Once again Vikram selected some men and asked Sri Ram if he would lead them to the village. Sri Ram refused, saying he wouldn't know what to do there. So Vikram called Chhote Mishra and handed him another 5000 rupees and a gold chain, giving the men the same warnings.

"Now only the junior members of the gang were left with us, Sri Ram and Lala Ram. Sri Ram saw this opportunity and began planning Vikram's death. At noon he suggested that Vikram and he go down to the river to bathe. Vikram asked me whether I wanted to go, whereupon Sri Ram began teasing him, saying these days he

couldn't go anywhere or do anything without Phoolan. This annoyed Vikram but he had also been provoked in front of Mahavir, a distant relative of Sri Ram who had come to visit him, so he got up and the three of them went down to the river.

"When they reached the river bank, Sri Ram said he had not eaten melon in a long time and went looking for one. It was the melon season and they grew in abundance in fields along the river. Vikram started talking to a boatman and sat down on his charpai, waiting for Sri Ram to return. Vikram had his back to the other two so did not see what happened but he thinks Mahavir fired the shot because, when he heard it and felt the pain, he looked round and saw Sri Ram's relative running away fast across the fields.

"There was consternation among members of the gang when they heard the sound of a shot. They didn't know who was shooting. Then the man on guard duty climbed a sand bank; he saw Vikram lying under the charpai with the boatman, Mahavir running away and Sri Ram trying to take charge of the situation, saying that all was well, there was no need to panic.

"I ran with other members of the gang towards the river. We heard Vikram shouting, 'Stop where you are. Don't come near me. I have been shot by someone.' Then he called out to me and said. 'Phoolan, you come here, alone.' I went up to him and started crying when I saw the blood. Vikram said, 'Don't be a fool. I'm all right. Where's your rifle?' I had left it in the camp. He then said, 'Now help me stand up and stop crying. If you weep they will think you can't deal with a crisis so pull yourself together.' Then with the support of my arm he got up. He grasped his rifle, tightened his lungi and shouted to the rest, 'I don't know how bad it is. I don't know whether I will live or die, but put down your guns and come closer, one at a time.'

"Sri Ram threw his gun down and started wailing like a woman as he rushed to embrace him. The others also came and we helped Vikram back to the camp. He asked Sri Ram why his relative had run away so fast and the reply was: 'He's only a simple farmer. He's not used to our ways. Perhaps he thought it was the police and got frightened thinking we'd been surrounded.'

Later that evening, Bharat and Chhote Mishra had returned with the rest and they all sat close by Vikram Mallah, watching his fever rise. A bullet had lodged itself in his thigh. Blood seeped steadily through the bandages Phoolan had made of clean strips of khaki, torn from new uniforms the gang had recently acquired, to which she had been attaching labels of rank. Bharat rushed back to the village of Dadri to arrange some form of transport. Phoolan and Vareylal, Vikram's uncle, were determined to try to get him to Jhansi somehow. Vikram's elder brother lived there with his family and could help them find a good doctor. Vareylal was sure of that.

While they waited, Sri Ram tried to prevail upon Phoolan Devi not to lose her head and make reckless decisions. "Can't you see he is dying? I've seen dying men before and I *know* Vikram would not like to die like a dog in police hands. Keep him here among friends who can perform his last rites. If he dies in hospital, the police will take his body."

Convinced that Sri Ram had been behind the attack, Phoolan Devi was in no mood to listen to his opinions and snapped back, "I will not let him die and he is not going to die. All I know is that someone shot him and there were no police in sight."

Hours passed and eventually an old farmer arrived with his bullock cart. Again Sri Ram said, "This is madness, putting him into that thing. Think of how long it will take you to get to Jhansi!"

Again she said to him coldly, "What did you expect from this village? A helicopter? Anyway, stop all your stupid talk. What I need is money to pay the doctor and anyone who is *really* his friend should give me what they've got. Vikram would have done the same if it were any of you."

As Bharat, Madho and Vareylal lifted the semi-conscious Vikram into the cart, Sri Ram handed Phoolan a bundle of notes.

In her diary she recalls: "Then Bharat said to me, 'Look after him, Phoolan, I will pray for his recovery. I wish I could come with you.' Then Vikram said, 'I don't know what will happen to me but you must all stay together and remain united.' He

appointed Bharat leader of the gang saying, 'I don't know a better man.' Vareylal, Vikram's uncle, offered to accompany me, saying I might not be able to manage on my own.

"We left the camp and reached Orai at midnight. We had to get a tempo, a three-wheeled scooter-rickshaw, to take us further. At first none of the drivers would agree because they saw Vikram was wounded and did not wish to be implicated in anything that might involve the police. Finally, a man agreed to take us at the exorbitant charge of 500 rupees. He didn't have an inter-city permit for Jhansi so it was a very tense journey. When he asked how Vikram had been wounded, we had to concoct a story saying we were labourers, working on a bridge, and that Vikram had fallen and hurt himself, so we were going home to find a doctor. The driver then started asking who the contractor was, saying it was surely *his* responsibility to make arrangements if one of his workers was injured. We spent a lot of time discussing the behaviour of contractors in relation to the ways in which they exploited their workers!

"We eventually reached Jhansi in the early hours of the morning. Vikram had a brother called Rampal and no one was aware that he was the brother of a dacoit. We went to his house, following Vikram's directions. He agreed to help immediately and went to fetch a doctor. He told the doctor it was a private matter, saying, 'Two of my brothers have had a quarrel and my elder brother shot this one with my father's rifle. Since the quarrel was over my sister-in-law, we do not wish to file a report with the police. The family would be disgraced so we must treat him at home.'

"The doctor arrived and Rampal asked him what his fee would be. He said it was a 'dangerous' case and asked how much we could afford. Rampal put a lakh in his hand and asked him to count it. When the doctor saw the money, he went to get a taxi and said he would like to get Vikram out of town to avoid any suspicion from neighbours. So Rampal, the doctor, Vikram and I got into the taxi and drove four miles out of town to a vacant house. The doctor left us there and went to fetch his instruments. Again, we felt tense, wondering if he could be trusted; but he returned in less than an

hour and operated on Vikram, removing the bullet. He left a supply of medicines for eight days and said he would keep in touch with Rampal. He also said, if we paid another 30,000 rupees for the operation and the medicines, he would ensure that we could stay in that house until Vikram had recovered. I told Rampal I had the money and paid the doctor. After that Rampal and Vareylal left in order to bring us some food and bedding. The quilt was soaked in blood.

"A few days passed like this. Vikram slept a great deal but I had been reassured that he would not die and knew he was getting better.

"Then the newspapers reported the story of Vikram's accident and even the fact that I had brought him to town for treatment. Some reports said he was dead. The doctor got suspicious and came to visit us one day, asking for our real identities. Vikram said in jest, 'I'll tell you tomorrow and I'll also reward you handsomely for looking after me and my wife so well.' As soon as the doctor left, Vikram said we had to go, so I went out and hired a tractor that was headed for Kanpur. We took all our belongings and escaped. This time the driver was not so curious because he thought the house he had come to was ours. I told him we needed a lift, since my brother-in-law had failed to turn up and Vikram had to go to Kanpur to have X-rays taken. The man got friendly, Vikram and he chatted through the journey and when I tried to give him some money, he refused, saying he was travelling to the city himself and had incurred no additional cost because of us.

"In Kanpur, we managed to hire a room and found another doctor to treat Vikram. The city was expensive and we soon ran out of money. Vikram couldn't travel, so I set out with his brother Rampal in search of Bharat and the gang in order to get more money from them. With great difficulty we were able to locate them. All the members contributed whatever they could. Those who didn't have money parted with gold and silver."

13

An Uneasy Peace

THE ANONYMITY OF KANPUR, a big, sprawling industrial city, was a relief. It has some of the oldest and largest textile mills in the country, mills in which cotton dust and fluff fill the air, clogging lungs, shortening lives and wreaking havoc on the health of those who work the looms that were introduced and established by the British in Victorian times. A maze of concrete blocks, built by mill-owners, house the workers and it was in such a colony that Vikram Mallah and Phoolan Devi managed to rent a room without much difficulty, through a contact.

Small and dingy as the room was, Phoolan says she remembers feeling safe for the first time in many months. She remembers the constant sound of children throughout the day, playing noisily up and down the stairways and corridors. She says she found their screams and laughter reassuring and realized how much she missed her own family and how much she wanted to have children of her own. She had, since the day of her abduction, begun to have increasingly painful periods and bled profusely at times. This worried her and she thought it was a bad sign but knew there was little she could do about it, given the life she now led.*

She told herself she had much to be grateful for. Vikram had

* In the course of an interview for *Indian Express* magazine in March 1983, Phoolan Devi was asked:

Q: Have you had a child?
A: No
Q: Don't you want one?
A: (Silence)
Q: What is the matter?
A: Once, in a fight in our village, I was hit in the abdomen. It injured my womb . . . Doctors say I need an operation.

made a remarkable recovery, he had several friends and acquaintances in the city and enjoyed taking her around. For Phoolan, shopping for essentials such as bandages and antibiotics, buying for herself the saris that she now had to wear, small luxuries such as glass bangles or mangoes from street vendors, were all new experiences and she began to enjoy herself. She saw her first Hindi film, *Sholay*, which had caused much controversy at the time of its release because it "glorified dacoits"; its superstar hero, Amitabh Bachchan, later became an MP in Rajiv Gandhi's government.

Although the dacoits of the Chambal Valley were once again making headlines in both English and Hindi newspapers, no one had ever photographed either Vikram Mallah or Phoolan Devi and they moved around freely, without fear of recognition. They made friends with neighbours in the tenement block where they occupied a room and a kitchen, introducing themselves as relatives of the official tenant, in Kanpur for medical treatment after an accident on the farm. They attracted little curiosity. Phoolan recalls listening to reports on the radio concerning themselves and other gangs in the company of mill workers who, like film audiences, romanticized the life she knew and talked of dacoits as if they were local celebrities. She felt elated to the point where she once asked a young man, who hung around in the evenings playing cards with Vikram, what he would say if she told him she was Phoolan Devi. He hadn't even looked up as he responded, saying he wouldn't believe it since Phoolan Devi rode a horse and he couldn't imagine her on one, with or without a rifle! They had all laughed.

With the money she had collected from members of the gang, they stocked up on cartridges for both their rifles, wrapped in a blanket under the bed, knowing they would soon have to return to the ravines. They had paid twenty-five rupees for each bullet used by the army and supplied to them by a jawan (soldier) on home leave who, by not asking too many questions, had developed a lucrative business.

They had been in Kanpur for almost three months and were waiting for information about the gang's whereabouts when something completely unexpected happened. Recalling the events from prison, Phoolan Devi says:

"One day there was a report in the newspapers that Bharat and Madho had been killed in a police encounter. Their photographs were also published. Vikram crouched on the floor as if in physical pain and said he felt as if both his arms had been amputated. His uncle Vareylal and I tried to tell him that the police often released false reports and that we should not react until we confirmed the facts. Unfortunately, the report was true. Apparently, Madho had been on his way to Delhi to meet his lover, Kusuma Nayan, accompanied by Bharat. They had been caught at Orai and the police are said to have staged an 'encounter', shooting them both at close range.

"The story of Madho and Kusuma was a tragic one. They both belonged to the same village, but to different castes. Madho was a Mallah and Kusuma a Nayan [a sub-caste of barbers within the caste of Sudras]. They were in love but since they were of different castes their relationship was not tolerated in the village. Madho was beaten by the villagers and Kusuma was married off in a hurry. Then, finding an opportunity one day, they both ran away from the village. When they returned in a year, having nowhere else to go, Kusuma's father coaxed her into returning to her husband, after giving him ten bighas of land to pacify him. Kusuma was an only child and her parents doted on her. They had Madho arrested and imprisoned for having abducted her. On his release Madho, who was Vikram's first cousin, went to him and said, 'The Nayans have assaulted me and abused my whole family. They have insulted my mother and my sisters. What should I do to take revenge?'

"Vikram was not a dacoit then. He invited Madho to stay in his house, looking after him for over a year, but Madho became very bitter about all that he had suffered at the hands of the Nayans and the police. In particular, he wanted to punish the pandit, who had beaten him with a shoe in front of many villagers before handing him over to the police. As a result, he said, all Mallahs in the village would now be subservient to the Nayans. This angered Vikram and finally he agreed to accompany Madho to his village so that they could give the pandit a good beating. The two of them went to the man's house, the fight got out of hand and they ended up beating him to death.

"After this they had to remain in hiding from the police and, to support themselves, got involved in dacoities, eventually having to choose it as a way of life. Vikram once told me that before this event he had no personal enmity with anyone; he had ruined his own life on Madho's account but, despite this, they had remained close.

"Madho started seeing Kusuma again and one day she ran away from her husband, having fought with her parents, accusing them of living peacefully while she suffered at the hands of the man they had forced her to marry. She wanted to be with Madho and joined them of her own free will. She soon discovered that she was pregnant, so she went to Delhi, where she was arrested by the police. Madho and the gang raised money for her bail and found her somewhere to live in Delhi. When I joined the gang she was not with them, although she had become a dacoit before I did. Madho often spoke of bringing her back and sent a man to fetch her, but she only stayed for four days, finding it difficult to move around with a child in her womb. I wasn't sure whether the child was Madho's or her husband's and didn't speak to her much either, as I was not considered a member of the gang at the time. She was very beautiful, fair-skinned, with brown hair, tall and well-built but full of complaints, which seemed to annoy Vikram. After she returned to Delhi, Madho would visit her from time to time and it was on one such visit that he and Bharat were discovered by the CID and shot dead.

"This left only Chhote Mishra and Sri Ram as senior members of the gang and Sri Ram took over as leader, replacing Bharat. We left Kanpur, moving from Orai to Devariya, and kept in touch with the others. Vikram's wound still gave trouble so we could not return. Then one day we heard that Chhote Mishra had left the gang after a quarrel with Sri Ram during which they had both abused each other. Vikram was dejected and said, 'Phoolan, there's no going back now. They were right about Sri Ram. They said he would cause divisions that would break up the gang and he has done just that. Some have been killed, others forced to run away and he is now the self-styled leader of a gang that is no longer ours. We cannot go back. We will have no allies and this time he will find it

easy to kill me if he wants to. We must look for Baba Mustaqeem as soon as I am able to walk at least twenty kos a day.'

"Vikram soon regained enough strength for us to start making our way back to an old hideout where he had left concealed some arms and ammunition, accumulated from previous dacoities. Since only he, Bharat and Madho had known of this, he was sure they would still be there and they were. 'Without arms', he said, 'we can't even begin to form a new gang and there would be no point in going to Baba like paupers on the run from our own gang'.

"It was raining that day. We had become clever at disguises so no one suspected who we were. Sometimes we dressed as truck drivers, at other times we impersonated officials from various government departments, wearing uniforms that we had gathered from various raids and kidnaps. We camped in the jungle near a village in Etawah, where we had contacts, and lived like that for some time.

"We soon got word that Sri Ram and Lala Ram were looking for us and had sent messengers to our sympathizers in Orai and Devariya, where we had been recently. We also heard that Kusuma had left Delhi, following the news of Madho's death, and was looking for us in the company of a man called Ujagar who had been a casual member of our gang, the same man Madho had once sent to Delhi to fetch her. Vikram said that before we decided what to do, we should visit our own villages, which would be the last place anyone would be looking for us.

"First, we went to Vikram's village. Everyone was shocked to see him, thinking he was dead. He was surrounded by well-wishers and enjoyed the attention. He said he had returned after a visit to heaven and he introduced me as his wife. He said, 'I'm not one to die so easily. I am protected by Kali. Which mother's son would dare kill me?' In many ways he had the spirit and bravado of a child! We met his brothers and sisters. His parents were away and his wife lived with his in-laws in another village.

"We left his village, without spending a single night there, and arrived at mine after three or four days. There, too, we got a warm and wonderful welcome. I was nervous of Maiyadin and what he might do, but Vikram went to his house and told him he had a

month in which to return the land he had stolen from our family. If he didn't, he would be shot. If he attempted to leave the village and call the police he would also be shot. We were alone so it was pure bluff but Maiyadin didn't dare take the risk and I never set eyes on him while we were there. He probably thought the rest of our gang were waiting to ambush him on the outskirts of the village. No one knew how vulnerable we were.

"We left the village and a few days later ran into Sri Ram, who wept and embraced Vikram like a long-lost brother, telling me, 'Phoolan, you are so brave, so clever, you've brought him back to us!' Vikram believed him and they vowed never to betray each other's trust and we found ourselves together once again. I asked Vikram what had happened to his earlier plan to meet up with Baba's gang and Vikram just said, 'The rivers are swollen. Can't you see? He's on the other side of the Ganga so we must wait till after the rains.' By this time I had been with Vikram for almost a year."

The number of active gangs seemed to have multiplied and the police's inability to contain the problem became an embarrassment to the Home Ministries of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajastan, from where the gang of Pan Singh Tomar operated, crossing and recrossing the borders of three separate administrative states, flouting all "police nets" that politicians claimed had been set for his capture. His story was making national news, and throughout the Chambal Valley stories were being told of his valour and integrity.

In 1958, Pan Singh Tomar had represented India at the Asian Games in Tokyo, winning a gold medal for his performance in the long-distance steeplechase. He had spent twenty-two years in the Indian army, which had trained and sponsored him. When he retired in 1971 as a subedar (non-commissioned officer), he returned to his village and got involved in a dispute over land on the side of his brother. They killed their enemy and took to the ravines. Much in the way Mansingh had done through the 1940s and 1950s, Pan Singh and his brother Matadin proceeded to wreak vengeance on all those associated with their former enemy. They kept themselves alive by looting villages, dominated by the caste of

Gujars to which their enemies belonged. His gang soon acquired the reputation of being the "most dreaded" in the valley.

Pursued for months by police patrols, one day in November 1980 Matadin was shot dead in an encounter, near the village of Pawa, not far from Gwalior in Madhya Pradesh. For several hours, a gun battle raged between the police and Pan Singh, who was determined not to allow his brother's body to end up in a police mortuary. Eventually, with no hope of any reinforcements reaching them in the ravines, the police retreated. Pan Singh Tomar, it is said, then lifted his dead brother and walked many miles, through Morena, crossing the border into Rajastan, so that he could give him a proper funeral, performing the final rites himself, at Bharatpur. This act of loyalty and tenacity made him a living legend.

Four days later, it is said, Pan Singh's gang returned to the village of Pawa in search of the informer who had led the police to their hideout. With them was Matadin's son, Balwant, who was now second-in-command. Unable to find the person they were looking for, they left. A police report states that "the terror-stricken Gujars had fled the village and taken refuge in Gwalior city". Some months passed and in March 1981 the gang returned. Sughar, the man they wanted, was not in the village but his sixty-year-old father and four other suspected informers were shot dead under the terrified gaze of many witnesses. The gang left a note claiming responsibility and stating their reason.

Many similar events followed this first revenge killing, but what lives in the minds of local people is Pan Singh Tomar's initial trek into Rajastan, where he cremated his brother. This adherence to prescribed religious ritual, particularly with respect to death, has been deeply felt in all societies but in India it has long been a fundamental obsession. For Hindus, death is accepted within the context of fate, but the soul can never be freed or released from the cycle of life and earthly desire unless the body is correctly handled before being reduced to ashes.

All dacoits, without exception, fear for the fate of their own souls, should their dead bodies end up in police hands. Dom Moraes, the poet and writer who now lives in Bombay, illustrates why. Commis-

sioned by the Madhya Pradesh government to write a book about the state, he describes an event he witnessed while accompanying a police patrol which ambushed a small gang of armed men. I met him in 1986 and we spoke of it, but his account in *Answered By Flutes*, he told me, was the best record he had of the incident:

> "Lajjaram," said the police officer. He nudged the body, as though he and it were conspirators in its death, with the scuffed toe of his boot. "He was the gang leader." Each syllable he spoke dropped into the depth of silence that had fallen after the firing, and produced a small echo. Violent action is always succeeded by this silence, and by an accompanying lassitude in which the mind becomes abnormally receptive and sensitized, like a convalescent's. Every impression then assumes tremendous importance. The ears fill with echoes, the eyes drink distances, the living world is tremulously inhaled till all the shocked senses are healed, and there is a resumption of reality.
>
> We were all, the dead man, the eleven policemen, the General and myself, together on the flat escarpment of Kalapahad, the black hill. Below us was the scrub-filled *nallah* [rivulet] in which the gang had holed up the previous night. Informers had apprised the police of their whereabouts. In the predawn darkness both ends of the *nallah* had been bottled up by armed constables. The only way out was to climb a dry and different watercourse, mailed with rusty scales of shale, to the top of the black hill, where another police party of sharp-shooters had been placed. In the chilly dawn, the dacoit leader heard his name spoken for the last time, when over a loudhailer the police demanded his surrender.
>
> The dacoits had stirred in the *nallah* scrub, then scattered down the declivity. Three escaped and two were captured. Only Lajjaram himself, rifle in hand, had scrambled up the watercourse to the hilltop. He had blundered blindly into a thicket of bullets, staggered halfway across the hilltop, bleeding as he came, dropped his rifle, thrown up his arms,

spun around a pivot of shock and pain, and fallen on his back. He was recumbent now on the black rock in a thick sticky pool of blood. His grimy white vest had been dyed crimson. His checked *lungi* had ridden up to his crotch. His puny arms and legs were flung wide in an attitude of crucifixion. His tongue protruded from his open mouth: his eyes, also open, showed no pain or fear, only the complete vacancy of the newly and violently dead.

"That's the way they die," said the police officer. The dawn sky was cloudy and cool, and farmers were already at their work in the fields below. A glimmer of distant water showed from the Tigra reservoir. Winged things infested the rough pelt of the sky overhead, pilgrim ants were already flocking down the bloodtrail that marked the dacoit's rush towards death, the blueflies hovered like microscopic helicopters above the open eyes, assessing the possibilities of breakfast. The country rifle he had carried lay near the body, a crude weapon with a chipped wooden stock. A policeman pulled the *lungi* down for decency and we saw the bandolier of bullets strapped around the skinny hips.

"The gang was a small one," the police officer told me, "but vicious. This fellow had a high price on his head. Now that he's dead, the gang is finished. Those who escaped may try and survive on their own, but they won't last out." He issued orders: two of the policemen took the corpse by the heels and dragged it away to a waiting halftrack on the slope. It was picked up and thrown into the back, between the seats. Some of the constables climbed in, to occupy these seats, and since the body was in the way, used it as a footrest. The *lungi* had rucked up once more, but this time nobody bothered to pull it down, or to close the eyes and mouth. The halftrack rumbled slowly downhill.

Later, at Tigra police station, the body was thrown in the dust of the courtyard and photographed from various angles for the official record. Tea was made, and we sipped it inside the station. The corpse was left in the courtyard.

> "If no relative claims it," said the officer, "we shall have to dispose of it ourselves. In the circumstances, it's unlikely that any relative will." One of the policemen outside, laughing, placed his foot on the body and suggested that he be photographed in the attitude of a successful *shikari* [hunter]. The officer ordered him away. "Don't think too badly of him," he said to me. "You haven't seen policemen killed, or any of the atrocities in the local villages."

Lajjaram, I discovered later, had accompanied Pan Singh Tomar to the village of Pawa where five men had been killed, just three days before his own death. It was March 1981. When I visited the village in 1987 and villagers realized we had come to research the story of baghis for a film, the hut we had been invited into was soon crowded and we were informed that "the great Pan Singh Tomar" had put their village on the map. Despite all the terror they had no doubt felt in the past, only the legend of the athlete-turned-baghi remained. No one seemed to have heard of Lajjaram.

Religious concerns surrounding rituals in death are so deeply felt that William Sleeman's cousin, Dr Henry Spry, who was medical officer in charge Saugor Jail in the 1830s, made note of an extraordinary event he witnessed around that time when some 583 Thugs were in custody, with "cartloads more" arriving every day. He says, referring to a group of men who had been sentenced to death:

> When morning came, numerous hackeries drew up at the gaol door, taking five men in each. They looked dreadfully haggard. As one cart was laden after the other, it was driven away, surrounded by sepoys with fixed bayonets and loaded muskets. The place appointed for the execution was on the north side of the town of Saugor, about a mile and a half from the gaol. "Ruksat, Doctor Sahib," "Salaam, Doctor sahib" – meaning "Adieu, Doctor Sahib", or "Compliments to Doctor Sahib" – were the salutations which I received as I rode by the wretched tumbrils which were jolting them to their execution. The gibbets were temporary erections, forming three sides of a square. The upright posts which supported the cross-beams were firmly

fixed in stone masonry five feet in height. From either side of these walls footboards were placed, on which the unhappy criminals were to land on reaching the top of the ladder. The cross-beams were each provided with ten running halters equidistant from one another. As each hackery load of malefactors arrived, it was taken to the foot of the respective ladders, and as one by one got out he mounted to the platform or footboard. Their irons were not removed. All this time the air was pierced with the hoarse and hollow shoutings of these wretched men. Each man as he reached the top of the ladder, stepped out on the platform and walked at once to the halter. Without loss of time he tried its strength by weighing his whole body on it. Everyone having by this means proved the strength of his rope with his own hands – for none of them were handcuffed – introduced his head into the noose, drew the knot firmly home immediately behind the right ear, amid terrific cheers, jumped off the board and launched himself into eternity! Thus in the moment of death we see a scrupulous attention paid to the preservation of caste. To wait to be hung by the hands of a *chamar* [skin-curer] was thought too revolting for endurance. The name would be disgraced for ever and, therefore, rather than admit to its degradation every man hanged himself."

By the summer of 1980, caste tensions added to other forms of suspicion and distrust was festering within Vikram Mallah's gang as they attempted to regroup. Phoolan Devi's dislike of Sri Ram and his brother Lala Ram was so openly demonstrated that they barely communicated with each other. Vikram Mallah tried to keep the peace, growing ever more disenchanted with his former guru. He had begun to see the same things in Sri Ram that Phoolan complained of continuously. Petty squabbles led to bad feelings and ruffled egos, yet they remained together in an uneasy alliance, fearing the disintegration of the new gang they were trying to build, without which they would become mere fugitives, on the run from the police of three states.

14

The Death of Vikram

THERE WERE NOW two women in the gang. Kusuma Nayan had met up with them and appealed to Vikram Mallah, saying she could no longer live in Delhi; she wanted to avenge Madho's death. Ujagar, who had accompanied her, also wished to join the gang. Vikram agreed, realizing his need for additional men and allies from the past, despite the fact that Phoolan and Kusuma were hostile to one another and Ujagar had little experience. He protested at first that an unattached woman in the gang would cause untold problems, but Kusuma assured him she intended to live with Ujagar as his wife, now that Madho was dead. She said there was no contradiction in this, as Madho and Ujagar had been "like brothers". The liaison was short-lived; Kusuma soon added to the dissension that had already taken root, by abandoning Ujagar and becoming Sri Ram's lover. Vikram was furious and told her to leave the gang, but Sri Ram's determination to confront Vikram over this issue resulted in Ujagar leaving instead. Once again Phoolan Devi found herself telling Vikram that he had made the wrong decision, powerless as they were to remedy the situation.

Vikram Mallah's fever kept recurring. Having to live in damp clothes without respite did not help and Phoolan Devi became increasingly concerned about his health and state of mind. They were close to the village of Baijamau, where Vikram's wife lived, when Sri Ram suggested he go and visit his son while the others camped nearby. Phoolan Devi made this record of the events of that night for her diary:

"Vikram said he was very tired and wanted to rest but Sri Ram persisted, saying it would be 'a bad thing' if he didn't at least visit

his only child. Vikram was persuaded and said he would **ask me. I** also felt he should visit his family and said I would go along with him. Sri Ram then said if I was going, 'why not the whole gang!' Vikram replied, 'Why not?' So we came to the outskirts of the village and sat down to rest under a neem tree. When Vikram got up to walk into the village, Sri Ram said we should go ahead while he waited behind, since he would feel out of place in Vikram's home. Vikram was irritated and asked him why he always changed his mind so easily, at the last minute.

"Eventually, Vikram and I ventured into the village with two more members of the gang. I was a little suspicious and wondered if this was part of some plan. Vikram brushed aside my fears, saying Sri Ram was like that; he was in the habit of changing his mind for no apparent reason. After a good meal, we returned to the gang but, as we left, someone sneezed, a bad omen that instilled a terrible fear in my heart. When I expressed my fear, Vikram laughed, telling me I was a fool to believe in such superstitions. A sneeze was a natural, harmless thing.

"At 1.30 a.m., when we met the gang, no one was asleep. They were all sitting scattered over a wide area. Sri Ram asked Vikram where our beds should be laid. Vikram said he was so tired he could sleep anywhere. Sri Ram indicated two beds and said those were for us. Vikram and I went off to sleep. Less than half an hour later, there was a loud noise, the sound of a bullet being fired. Vikram sat up suddenly and I thought the police had surrounded us. I reached for our rifles but they had been removed. Then, Vikram fell forward, his head in my lap and said he was dying. 'This time I will not be saved,' is what I think he said, once or twice. I started screaming and shouting, still groping for my rifle in the dark. I knew he had been shot; I could feel the wetness of blood as I ran my hand all over him to find out where he had been injured. Then I heard another shot and he slumped forward, lifeless, as I saw Sri Ram rushing towards me. He started beating me, saying I had no one left – no friends, no sympathizers. I heard more shots. They had killed Vikram's uncle, Vareylal.

"They held something to my mouth and nose. I think it was

chloroform. It dulled all my senses so quickly that I felt as if I was in a dream. I remember being tied down and knowing I was still alive. Everything seemed so unreal. It was the month of Sawan and there was very heavy rain. I had been with Vikram for exactly one year."

It was the night of 13 August 1980 and the local press soon picked up the story. The police were called and Vikram's body photographed for the record. I am told his father-in-law claimed the body and arranged the funeral but no one is very sure.

Speaking of these experiences to the press, after her surrender in 1983, Phoolan Devi's responses were measured, before a sea of strangers and cameras. At an official press conference, organized by the authorities, she answered in the following way:

Q: Have you known fear?

A: Every day I have lived with fear. I knew fear on the first night when Vikram and Babu Singh came for me and there was talk of killing me. Twice in the jungle I knew fear also. I was asleep and felt something lashing my face. I reached out and grabbed it. It was the tail of a panther. He ran away. The other time was when I was sitting at our *dera* [camp] and I suddenly found something slithering on my thighs. The light from the camp fire was dim and I thought one of the men was trying to joke with me. I thought he had thrown a rope at me. Then I realized it was a snake. I quickly picked it up and threw it aside. I thought it was an *ashubh* [ill omen] and we picked up our guns and ran. Ten minutes later from the camping place we saw lights of a very strong police contingent. God sends his own signals. . . .

Q: What was life like in the ravines?

A: I do not have words to tell what it was like. Few people will ever be able to understand it. You have to live there to know. We used to walk 12 to 15 kos [about 25 miles] every day. There was no peace or fixed routine for eating or sleeping. If we were hungry, we would go into a village with our *lathis* and come away with about four days' food. Sometimes we paid for what we took. We used to sleep in

the open, wrapped in a tarpaulin sheet, even during the monsoon. We were careful to eat mainly at night. We knew the police could tell where we were by watching for the kites which would circle over us. We had to be careful about smoke too, and all fires at night had to be kept low.

Q: Was it this hard life or police pressure that led to your surrender?

A: I told you, I am not afraid of the police. Life was hard. But it has always been hard. . . .

Q: You sound bitter.

A: Today I am a criminal who should be hanged. But what happened when I was abducted and raped? Where were the police then? I had gone to the police on the day of my abduction to ask for protection, yet today the policemen are officers and Phoolan Devi a murderer. . . .

Q: How many crimes have you committed?

A: I cannot remember. I do not know how many people I have kidnapped or how many dacoities I have committed. . . .

Q: Where have you been for the past two years?

A: I have been in Raxaul and I have spent seven to ten days in all the districts from Jhansi to the Nepal border. I have been in all the districts of UP, through which the Yamuna flows. I have spent a long time just travelling the Yamuna ravines. The police owe me a lot of shoes.

Q: Because of all the running you've done?

A: No, because I left my shoes behind. I have a habit of casting them off whenever I sit down. I am a woman of the village and shoes restrict me but in the ravines I must wear them because of the thorns. Every time the police encircled us, I would leave my shoes behind to take up position. Sometimes I thought of going back to recover my shoes, but then decided against it. Let the police wear Phoolan's shoes.

Q: *Where did you get your shoes?*

A: From villages. I asked for shoes and people gave them.

Q: *Wasn't that like begging?*

A: Dacoits and beggars are the same.

There are various versions of what happened to Phoolan Devi after Vikram Mallah's death. When I spoke to her, she was reluctant to speak of her bezathi (dishonour), as she put it, at the hands of the Thakurs. She did not want to dwell on the details and merely said, "*Un logo ne mujhse bahut mazak ki.*" (Those people really fooled with me.) I was not surprised by her reticence to elaborate. First of all, because we had an audience, including members of her family, other prisoners and their relatives; secondly, because we live in societies where a woman who is abused sexually inevitably ends up feeling deeply humiliated, knowing that many will think it was her fault, or partly her fault, that she provoked the situation in the first place. Phoolan Devi, like many other women all over the world, feels she will only add to her own shame if she speaks of this experience.

Still, enough is known from the research of journalists who followed up the story at the time, travelling to villages in the ravines and talking to people who had been caught up in the flow of events. Jon Bradshaw, for instance, an American journalist who wrote an article for *Esquire*, gives this account:

The gang raced down to the Yamuna river where their boats were moored, and it was only when they were sitting in one that Phoolan realized Vikram was missing. She tried to return to shore, but Sri Ram clubbed her with an oar, declaring that he had killed Vikram, that he was sick of taking orders from scum, from a fisherman. "You have been spared because my brother, Lala Ram, wants you for himself," he shouted.

They sailed down the dark river for several miles, stopping finally at a village called Behmai, where Phoolan was held captive. She was locked in a filthy hut. That first

night she cowered on the floor, crying out for Vikram. Shortly after midnight, the door opened and a man whom she could not see came in. He beat her first, and then, as she lay on the floor, ripped off her clothes. Phoolan screamed, striking out at him, but he was too strong. Holding her down, the stranger raped her. They came in one by one after that – tall, silent Thakur men – and raped her until at last Phoolan lost consciousness.

For the next three weeks, Phoolan was raped several times a night, and she submitted silently, turning her face to the wall. Some time later – she had lost all sense of time – the door opened and bright sunlight poured in. Blinded, she put her arm across her face, and a loud voice summoned her outside. Sri Ram and Lala Ram and a group of Thakurs, some of whom she felt she recognized, stood around the village well. There were no women anywhere. Sri Ram ordered Phoolan to fetch water for him from the well, and when she refused, he ripped off her clothes and kicked her savagely. At last she limped to the well while her tormentors laughed and spat at her. The naked girl was then dragged back to the hut and raped again.

That night, the 23rd of her captivity, Phoolan heard a knock at the door and Santosh Pandit, a priest from the nearby village of Simra, crept in. The priest and Phoolan were old friends. Putting his arm around her, he said, "I know what they have done to you. Everyone in the village knows. But there was nothing I could do till now. The Singh brothers finally left Behmai this morning and the villagers are all asleep. Come, let me get you out of here." Phoolan began to cry hysterically. The priest carried her outside – "She was as light as a sack of feathers and bone," he recalled – and took the girl by bullock-cart to Pandri, one of Phoolan's contact villages where, he knew, she would be nursed and safely concealed.

Later on Phoolan told me, through her diaries: "In the morning,

when I came to my senses, I discovered that I was bound hand and foot. I started whimpering, demanding to know why I had been bound when I had not done anything. I wondered whether this was all a joke. I was struggling, screaming, when Kusuma came running to me. She kicked me and said, 'Who are you shouting for now? There is no one here who will listen to you. Your tiger is dead, killed by my Thakur!' She was carrying on in this vein, when Sri Ram arrived with two men who didn't seem to be dacoits. They were probably men from the village. They dragged me out of the boat and started abusing me, pushing and shoving me towards the village.

"I was treated like an animal. Every passer-by insulted me and many assaulted me physically. I pleaded with them to kill me and not to torture me any more. Kusuma watched all this with glee, laughing, clapping her hands and taunting me about Vikram. It was almost twenty-four hours since my capture and I had not been given even a drop of water to drink.

"At night I was taken to a village where I was kept locked up for three days without food or water. I was not even allowed out to relieve myself and everyone seemed to be celebrating our humiliation. Initially, four other men from the gang had been with me in the boat, bound as I was, but now I was alone, wondering what had happened to them. Sri Ram said now the police would leave them alone, since they had got rid of 'such a notorious dacoit', adding that he might even be able to collect the reward that had been on Vikram's head. Even the villagers seemed happy about Vikram's death. I had never been to that village before and did not even know its name.

"In this way, I was paraded from village to village and don't even know the names of the places they took me to. Eventually, I and a companion, Bhiku – I don't know what happened to the others – were taken to the village of Simra. There we met an elderly pandit who knew me since his son, Shiv Swaroop, had been with us for a while till he was killed in a police encounter. He congratulated Sri Ram for having killed Vikram and invited everyone to his house. Looking at me, he asked Sri Ram why I had been spared. Sri Ram laughed, saying that he would soon be delivering my corpse to the police station.

"When we reached his house, he seated them all comfortably, making me and Bhiku sit some distance from the rest. He said lunch would soon be served, after a puja, prayers he was going to recite for the future welfare of Sri Ram's gang. As he passed me, on the way to the kitchen, he made a kind of surreptitious gesture indicating the back of the house, but I looked away, not understanding the significance, suspicious of his intentions. When he returned he told Sri Ram that Phoolan should be locked in the back room, since she was not a pretty sight all bound up and filthy. I looked at Bhiku, not wanting to leave him, afraid of what this priest might do to me in the back room but, after Sri Ram had agreed, he told us both to get up.

"In the room, he showed us a hole in the back wall behind a pile of firewood, saying he had just broken it himself to give us an escape route. He told us to remain in the room for a while and wait for him to return. He said he would give the key of the door to Sri Ram in order to divert any suspicion he might have in the future. I suddenly realized that Durga had answered my prayers.

"A little later the pandit entered the room through the hole in the wall. He handed me a 12-bore rifle and wished us luck, pointing out the direction of the river and assuring us that the neighbours would not betray us even if we were seen leaving his house. He untied us and we escaped, running for our lives until we reached the banks of the Jamuna. The first thing we did was to quench our thirst. I was not sure where to go. To return to my village would be dangerous; that was the first place the police would look for me. Suddenly, I thought of my cousin and decided to go to his village instead. Bhiku said he would accompany me part of the way and then head for Kanpur, where he had relatives.

"We arrived at a village called Dehalkan on the way, where we were surrounded by Thakurs who started firing at us. I returned the fire and vowed to Kali that, having escaped from that other Thakur, Sri Ram, I would kill each and every Thakur I found to avenge Vikram's death. We escaped from there and came upon the village of Narhan. There was a temple on the outskirts of the village, dedicated to the Mother Goddess, Durga. As we prayed before the idol, I heard footsteps. I asked the intruders to identify

themselves, but they wanted to know who we were. I told them I was Phoolan Devi, thinking they were villagers and Narhan had been a friendly village. To my horror, they turned out to be policemen. They started shouting orders to each other, taking cover and firing at the shrine. I fired back but knew I had only twenty-five bullets. Still, we managed to hold them at bay and eventually managed to escape under the cover of darkness with just two bullets left. Durga protects.

"It was very dark and we seemed to be surrounded by water. We found it very difficult to keep to the path and the Jamuna, swollen by rain, seemed like an ocean. We did not even have shoes on our feet.

"We wandered around till about 6 a.m. and then sat down to get our bearings. We discovered we were sitting under a neem tree on the outskirts of a village. We climbed the tree to survey the scene and discovered that the area was teeming with policemen. I told Bhiku that this time we would not be able to escape. It appeared that the police had followed us and we had only two bullets and one gun. I told Bhiku I intended to stay in the tree and await my end but that he was free to go, though I advised him against it. He too decided to stay.

"We sat in that tree the whole of that day. Several policemen passed by, some even sat down to eat and drink under the tree, but we were not discovered. After 6 p.m., when they had left, we climbed down half-dead with hunger and thirst. We walked towards the village and met an old man, who was the first to give us water to drink. I asked the name of the village and he said it was Pandri.

"I cannot express the relief I felt. I knew a man from that village called Vijay Singh Chauhan who was also a dacoit and I was sure we would get assistance. We entered the village and sent for his brothers. I explained the situation and said we needed ammunition. They warned me that the police had been to the village looking for me and also that Sri Ram and Lala Ram were offering money for information as to my whereabouts. Sri Ram had killed the old pandit who helped us escape.

"They said we must hide and offered the shelter of their home for a few days. I had no money and asked to borrow some saying that if we escaped alive, we would return their 2000 rupees, but if we were killed, we would die in their debt. They were very kind and I didn't want to compromise their families so we left after a day's rest. They helped me find a fisherman who was prepared to ferry us across the river for 1000 rupees. We lay in the bottom of his boat and he covered us with fishing-nets. As we passed under a bridge, I could see that it was swarming with policemen."

Several kilometres short of the village of Nagina, Phoolan Devi asked the boatman to drop her off, not wanting him to know where she was going. He was a young man who had barely spoken either to her or Bhiku throughout the journey, having bargained at length over money. She decided to leave the rifle with Bhiku, knowing that a dacoit without a gun was powerless in the company of strangers. She set off alone, walking in a direction opposite to the one she intended to take, again for the benefit of the boatman, while Bhiku continued downstream through the district of Kanpur.

15

Meeting Man Singh

WHAT FOLLOWS is based on Mannu's version of events, as he told it to me, some eight years later. We were sitting in the same hut, on the ravine's edge bordering one side of the village where Phoolan Devi had taken refuge, unknown to the rest of the family.

He was alone at home listening to the radio quite late at night. He had lit the kerosene lamp in his room and was lying on his bed when he heard a timid tap on the outer door leading into his courtyard. At first he ignored it, thinking it was the iron chain swinging against the wood – it was so faint. Then the sound was repeated and he went out, wondering who it could be. Anyone from his own family, or a friend, would have called out or knocked in a more positive way. He asked who it was and there was no reply but the same light tap was repeated. Feeling somewhat apprehensive, he unlocked the door and was shocked to see Phoolan, looking thin and exhausted, barefoot, her khaki shirt tattered and filthy. The last time he'd seen her had been at his aunt's house, dressed in a sari. Now her hair was cut short, unwashed and matted with dust. He knew there was a price on her head and had read newspaper reports of her exploits. Letting her into the courtyard, he looked up and down the alleyway to check if she was being observed but the pathway was quiet and deserted.

For some reason he spoke in a whisper, asking her what she was doing there, what had happened, whether she was alone. She too replied in a whisper, asking if anyone else was in the house. Locking the door, he led her into his room and noticed that she was shivering. Although the rain had cooled the air, it was far from cold. She sat on the bed, looking nervously round the room. At first he felt it was

because of custom, since the normal place to talk would have been in the courtyard. In a state of confusion himself, he picked up the lamp and led her out again, saying he would bring the charpai. When he returned, Phoolan Devi was huddled against the mud wall, weeping uncontrollably, much to his alarm. He helped her to her feet and made her sit on the bed once more, asking if she wanted some tea. She began taking deep breaths in an attempt to regain control of herself and asked for water.

Eventually she said, her eyes fixed to the mud floor, "Vikram's dead."

This too came as a shock. "Police?" he asked but she merely shook her head and burst into tears again. He covered her with a blanket, feeling helpless at the intensity of her grief, as he watched her shivering. It took a long while, he said, for her to calm down and explain what had happened.

For more than a week after that, Phoolan Devi lived in her cousin's hut, her nerves in shreds, both of them alert to every sound. Mannu was aware of all the dangers involved and, although no one in the village knew she was there, sooner or later there would be trouble. Despite this, he did his best to make her feel secure and welcome. He felt great sympathy and sadness for what she had suffered and racked his brain for a way out. His was not a "safe" village. If the police intensified their hunt, Nagina would almost certainly be on their list. It was just a question of time. The newspapers had already reported Vikram's death, with police officers from Uttar Pradesh claiming that they had "eliminated" him as a result of their own diligence and the efficiency of their intelligence network.

Over the years, Mannu had been in touch with various dacoit gangs, carrying messages and running occasional errands in order to earn some money, so he knew something of the rivalries and alliances that existed within their world. He also knew of Vikram Mallah's connections and eventually suggested that they try to find Mustaqeem, whom Vikram had visited with a view to strengthening his own position. At first, Phoolan had been reluctant, recalling the Muslim bandit leader's dismissive attitude towards her, but

eventually agreed that her cousin's suggestion was the only realistic possibility. After all, Vikram *had* struck some sort of deal with Mustaqeem although it had never been put to the test. Besides, she was well aware that she had few options. She could not remain in Nagina for long, living as a fugitive in her cousin's hut, and she could not return to her own village either.

Locking her into his home one day, Mannu made the trip to Kanpur in order to try to gather information about the gang's whereabouts. He returned late at night, somewhat dejected, having paid some contact a large amount of money which he felt, almost instantly, had been a mistake. The police were out in force and it seemed unlikely that the man would have much success.

They were still waiting for word from their "contact" when Mannu rushed in excitedly one evening. He had heard from another source that Mustaqeem was going to be in the village of Galauli that night. He would leave by dawn, so if they were to meet him it had to be that night. While Phoolan Devi sat down to repair her khaki shirt, now washed but still torn in many places. Mannu went out to make the necessary arrangements. He returned in high spirits a couple of hours later. He had managed to rent a boat, which he would row himself; he also borrowed a rifle from a friend, saying he wanted to shoot river duck the next morning. Handing Phoolan the gun, he said, "There's no time to look for bullets." She questioned the purpose of an unloaded gun but he said it would create a good impression. It was better than nothing. Phoolan Devi laughed for the first time in many days as she tied a red bandanna round her head and changed from her cousin's lungi and shirt into her renovated police uniform.

They left the village soon after dark. Mannu walked through the village streets and across fields to the river, while Phoolan took the long way round, through the ravines. Mannu had bought her new running-shoes in Kanpur and she felt suddenly optimistic, wondering how she could ever repay him for all the love and concern he had demonstrated.

At the river, she lay down in the bottom of the boat, which was more like a dinghy and rocked alarmingly from side to side with the

slightest movement. The waters of the river ran rough and they had to travel upstream, against the current.

As they approached their destination, some hours later, Mannu rowed the boat towards the sandbanks, switching from oars to a wooden pole which guided them round the dunes. Two logs of wood, sunk into the sand, indicated that they had arrived at the nearest point to the village of Galauli. They walked some distance and then Mannu told her to wait under a tree while he went into the village alone, to check if all was well. Much to his relief, the village was quiet and the young boy he had paid had delivered his message. Mustaqeem was expecting them and had sent two men to the house, which was his contact address, to await their arrival.

They accompanied Mannu back to the outskirts of the village in a casual and friendly manner. Phoolan was not where he had left her, but after he called out a couple of times, she emerged silently and deftly, like an animal from the surrounding cover of shrub.

One of the men with Mannu was Man Singh, a high-ranking member of the gang, whom Phoolan had seen earlier. He had the same long tangled hair as before but was dressed like a villager, his rifle slung casually over his shoulder. The other man was younger and she didn't recognize him.

"Baba is waiting for you," said Man Singh in a quiet and polite voice, handing her an old cotton sari. "He thinks it will be safer if you wear this."

Phoolan wrapped it round her police uniform, covering her head, and removed her shoes, which Mannu offered to carry, taking the rifle from her.

They reached a brick house with a raised mud platform outside it, covered with thatch. On a string bed, barely visible in the dark, were two armed guards who rose to their feet as Man Singh approached with the others. They stepped forward to greet Phoolan Devi, bending down to touch her feet. "*Jai! Jai!*" they said, "Phoolan Devi *ki jai*!" Mannu said he remembered feeling elated at the knowledge that all his efforts and anxiety were being rewarded; the respectful welcome his cousin was given had far exceeded his expectations.

Inside, a kerosene lamp lit up a corner of the courtyard where Mustaqeem sat on a large straw mat surrounded by other members of his gang, smoking a hookah which was being passed round. All except the bandit chief rose to their feet, as they entered behind Man Singh. Mannu was struck by the extreme politeness of their manner, which was almost ceremonial. He handed Phoolan Devi the rifle as she removed her sari, before going forward to touch Baba Mustaqeem's feet. He responded by inviting them both to sit down and ordered some tea, despite the lateness of the hour. The entire household seemed to be awake, including young children who ran in and out of the courtyard, as if it were the middle of the day.

Mustaqeem had heard of Vikram Mallah's death but said he didn't know anything of the details. He asked Phoolan to tell him exactly what had happened. As she spoke, all around her became quiet. After weeks of trauma and emotional upheaval, she was able to relate the story calmly, without tears, probably aware of how important it was to win the support of these men whom she barely knew. Mannu said he could tell that Mustaqeem was impressed by her dignity and self-control; genuinely saddened by the details of her tale, as were the others. To break the silence that followed, Man Singh said, "Vikram Mallah *ki jai*!" and others responded, in the same sombre tone, expressing their sympathy and solidarity in various ways.

Mustaqeem said he had warned Vikram not to trust the Singh brothers, or any other Thakurs for that matter. He had always suspected that Sri Ram, in particular, was in the pay of UP police as an informer. "How else did those two get out on bail with so many charges hanging over their heads?" he asked, as if the answer were self-evident. Phoolan Devi didn't volunteer the information that she and Vikram had raised the money. They talked for many hours and he assured her that Vikram's death would be avenged. The Singh brothers would be tracked down and killed like the dogs they were.

There was to be a council meeting of all the important gangs operating in the area, he informed her. That was his reason for being in Galauli. Malkhan Singh would be there too. Vikram Mallah, he

said, had been like a younger brother to him, reckless as he had been. But then, that had been part of his charm, the reason for his popularity. Mustaqeem was almost certain that other gangs would support their vendetta. He would in any case instruct all gangs over which he had any influence to seek information about the movements of Sri Ram and Lala Ram. They could not survive long, he assured her.

Encouraged by Mustaqeem's unqualified support, Phoolan Devi asked if she could join his gang; she had nowhere else to go. He refused. This was one rule he could not bend. He would not have a woman in his gang, although he would give her every other kind of support she needed.

"Choose another man," he advised. "Form your own gang, Phoolan Devi, it is the only way."

Then, turning to Man Singh, he told him to find her a comfortable bed for the night, asking Mannu if he wished to stay as well. The police, he said, were looking for him in another district. Galauli would be safe for a few days, after which he could arrange for Phoolan to stay with other contacts he had in other villages. He realized she could not return to Nagina in the circumstances.

Mannu and Phoolan followed Man Singh into the house, where he instructed two women to "feed them well and put decent quilts on their beds". Before either of them could express their gratitude, he returned to the courtyard. Mannu had to return the boat and the rifle he had borrowed, so he left soon after they had eaten, saying he would be back in a day or two and reassuring his cousin that she had made a good start. He felt if she got to know Mustaqeem better he might relent and allow her the protection of his gang for a while. His assessment of the situation proved to be correct.

In her statement to the police, recorded in 1983, she said: "After three days, I heard that dacoit Balwan Vaghela and his gang were in the Kalpi area so I decided to join them. This gang consisted of eight or nine members and after nine days of living with them, we came upon Baba Mustaqeem's gang of eighteen to twenty people and I left to join them instead. I was with this gang for about six months. But Mustaqeem said it was not possible for me to carry on like this

and that I must attach myself to one of the members. One of the members, Man Singh, was persuaded to keep me and I accepted him as my husband."

Apparently what happened was that Mustaqeem initially suggested she join Balwan Vaghela, still adamant about the fact that he couldn't have a woman in his gang. Balwan, he said, was an associate of his and would incorporate her in his gang if he recommended it. He had sent her to Kalpi with an escort to make contact, saying they would meet up again to see how things were working out. Phoolan did as he said, having little choice. She felt completely out of place with the new gang, nervous of the advances the men within it would inevitably make. When she next met Mustaqeem, she expressed her fears, imploring him to take her away. Man Singh supported her, persuading his leader that they owed her that much, after all she had suffered. Mustaqeem had agreed reluctantly.

In the months that followed, Man Singh became her friend and ally as she travelled with the gang; but Mustaqeem – although he admired her nerve and spirit, her ability with a rifle – remained uneasy about the situation, and tensions began to develop. He told her it could not go on.

Man Singh, who had been attracted to her from the start, during this period suggested that they form an independent gang and offered to share the leadership of it with her. Hostile at first, still loyal to the memory of Vikram Mallah, she had retorted, "I'm nobody's plaything any more." Later, as Mustaqeem's opposition to her grew, Phoolan Devi realized she had little option and approached Man Singh herself, apologizing for her earlier rebuttal. He had kept aloof since then and she had begun to miss his friendship. She realized how dependent she had become on his support and she was increasingly aware of her own vulnerability and apprehensive about the future. She said she would live with him as he wished, so long as he accepted the fact that after all she had suffered at the hands of the Thakurs she found any physical contact with a man, any man, unbearable. When I asked her what his reaction had been, she told me he had merely smiled at the time.

Man Singh discussed the idea with Mustaqeem, who accepted

readily, offering him additional men with whom they could start another, autonomous gang. It was agreed that for joint operations they would come together, sharing the booty equally among those involved. That way, a number of small gangs could operate independently, under the overall leadership of Mustaqeem, keeping in touch and sharing the information they gathered.

Man Singh approached two other men in the gang, Laltu and Jage, who were his closest friends. It was agreed, with Baba's blessing, that they would split from the rest, taking four rifles, some money and enough ammunition to launch the "Phoolan Devi–Man Singh" gang.

The rains had stopped and the heat was intense in the October of 1980. Vikram Mallah had been dead for just over three months and his death remained to be avenged. Phoolan Devi thought of little else. Before leaving with Man Singh, she wanted to test Mustaqeem's commitment to this act of revenge. Aware of the power he wielded, she wanted to understand what their joint strength really amounted to in practical terms. With this in mind, she approached him one day as he sat alone in the half-shade of some thorny shrub:

"I told Baba that there was a woman in a village close by whom Sri Ram considered his sister. I had been dragged before her, bound hand and foot, and she had insulted me. I asked if he would accompany me to the village. He agreed and selected eight to ten men. We reached her place at noon and I caught hold of her and gave her a sound thrashing. I said, 'Now tell me, where is your friend, your "brother"? I remember how you encouraged him to beat me – you even suggested that they should kill me because you were afraid of what I might do later! Now, what do you think I should do with you? I am alive, as you see, but death hovers over you.' Then I beat her again as she screamed and wept, touching my feet, begging for mercy. She got so frightened she messed herself.

"We killed her husband and, before he died, he confessed that he had got the chloroform for Sri Ram from a police hospital, the same chloroform Sri Ram had used the night Vikram was killed. We left a note on his body saying, 'All police informers and middlemen will

suffer the same fate. Anyone who helps those Thakur dogs, Sri Ram and Lala Ram, will be treated in the same way.'

"After leaving, we came to the jungle and sent messages to other dacoit gangs in the area to collect there. Within ten days, all the gang leaders assembled. Vijay, Balwan, Raghunath, Ram Avtar and Baba Mustaqeem – in all about a hundred men belonging to five gangs. Baba told them that Man Singh and I were forming our own gang and each leader put a tilak on my forehead, saying they would respect me as leader of my own men.

"There was extreme lawlessness in the area and the police did not seem to rest at all. They seemed to be searching for us relentlessly, day and night. Being under such pressure, the gangs were scattered. Only Baba's gang and ours worked together. We carried out several kidnappings and dacoities for money, sharing it equally among our members."

16

Planning Revenge

MAN SINGH, LIKE Phoolan Devi, was of the Sudra caste, born into a sub-caste of milkmen or herdsmen. His social standing in the village hierarchy was the same as that of the Mallahs. In his statement to the police in February 1983 he said of himself:

"I was born in a village. I was not interested in studying. I did not help much in the house. Farming was our mainstay and I would help with that. My father died nine years ago but my mother is still alive. My father used to till the land and I have three other brothers who are also farmers. They now have a dairy. I was outlawed.

"One day seven years ago, dacoits Balwan Singh and Baba Mustaqeem came quite close to our house. Balwan had killed a police sub-inspector but the police accused us of it. Three of us, two of my brothers and I, were implicated in this case so we had to run away and eventually joined the gang of Baba Mustaqeem. At that time this gang consisted of only three members and with me it made four. Two of my brothers were arrested by the Kalpi police and then set free on bail. The case is still going on. Later, the police arrested my brother in connection with another case for which he is still in prison. My brother, Baba, who was let out on bail, was taken from Kalpi thana on the pretext of being brought to see me but on the way they killed him in what they described as an 'encounter'. Another person who was with them at the time, a Chamar, Ramsnehi, was also killed in the same false encounter. These killings angered me and to avenge my brother's death, three years later, I killed the Yadavs in Dhamra village because they had been our enemies. I was still with Baba Mustaqeem's gang at the time. I

killed seven more people at the same time, all Yadavs, but I do not remember their names."

By the time Man Singh met Phoolan Devi towards the end of 1980, and offered to share with her the leadership of his gang, he had discovered, like most other bandit leaders, that kidnaps-for-ransom or looting commercial trucks that travelled unlit highways at night were the safest and most lucrative ways of operating. Raids on villages were usually left for acts of revenge, against particular people or against a particular caste of people, rather than for financial gain, although each raid brought some wealth, usually money or gold, into the gang's coffers.

Impressed by her aim, Man Singh chose a .303 Mauser rifle for Phoolan. He had seen her bringing down wild river duck at dawn with a single shot. Being a vegetarian, he did not eat any meat himself but he had no objection to the rest enjoying it. He was a quiet and introspective man, the opposite of Vikram Mallah, and the more he was drawn to Phoolan, the more aloof he kept, treating her as his partner rather than his woman.

All this was new to Phoolan. Not only did Man Singh and Baba Mustaqeem support her desire for vengeance, they treated her as an equal, encouraging her individuality. Man Singh always asked her opinions, discussed plans, debated contradictions, before making decisions. He trusted her judgement but also relied on his own experience, and they worked well together. Sexually, he never imposed himself, much to her surprise. Other members of the gang considered her to be his property though he did not treat her as such and their interaction gave her the protection of privacy, which she had never experienced before. Talking about those first few months with him, she said from jail:

"My one thought was of revenge. Whenever we heard that the Singh brothers had been seen in a particular village, we would attack the place. We never found them, not even in the villages where they were supposed to be hiding. We would carry a loudhailer and I would call out to Sri Ram: 'If you have a beard on your face, if you are a man, come out and kill me in the open. I stand before you. But you low-down traitor, you Thakur dog! You can

only shoot from behind. Why do you run now? Why do you allow innocent villagers to pay for your sins?' "

Around this period, special units of police had been sent into the area, as local Congressmen and politicians of every hue demanded "positive solutions to the dacoit menace". Each state had an Inspector General of Police (IG), under whom were a number of Deputy Inspector-Generals (DIG), in charge of Anti-Dacoity Operations. Thousands of armed police were involved – the Special Armed Force (SAF) in Madhya Pradesh, the Police Armed Constabulary (PAC) in Uttar Pradesh and the Rajastan Armed Constabulary (RAC) – all equipped with automatic, self-loading rifles. A formidable force that kept gangs constantly on the move. With varying prices on their heads, gang leaders were never sure of their own safety. Inter-gang rivalries often resulted in tip-offs to the police from one gang about the movements of another. No one could be trusted. Suppliers were made to eat the food they brought as a precaution against poison.

The police department was also riddled with inter-state rivalry. Each state claimed more success than the other. The police high command had come out forcefully, demanding more funds from the central government in Delhi to pay for additional men, better training and the setting up of an intelligence network based on paid informers. Without the offer of money, villagers tended to be tight-lipped. They also complained of the lack of support and too much interference from local partymen, mostly Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), who were known to fraternize with certain dacoit gangs, protecting their contacts, in exchange for village votes.

In this political climate, Phoolan Devi and Man Singh continued to operate, steadily gaining a reputation for themselves. Their relationship had developed and they now lived as lovers. She was still obsessed with avenging Vikram's death but Man Singh did not object. In many ways he admired her loyalty to the memory of the dead bandit leader. He had known Vikram only superficially but had heard much about him through Mustaqeem, who had genuinely cared for Vikram Mallah as a friend, almost as a "son",

even though the age difference between them had been only a few months. He assured Phoolan Devi, putting up with all her moods and outbursts, that he had not forgotten the Singh brothers but, at the same time, money had to be earned to keep the men happy. Venturing into a village to kill one of their contacts, he told her, was a waste of time, futile and dangerous. The men would not continue to support her vendetta if they were asked, time and time again, to court arrest or death for no material gain.

Phoolan, in a sullen mood, said to him one day, "All you can think about is money and the men."

"That's not true," he replied.

"Well, then," she said, "Baijamau must be punished." Baijamau was the village near which Vikram had been killed. She knew it well; she knew which part housed the Thakurs and she knew the poor end too, inhabited by people of her own caste.

Man Singh agreed in order to demonstrate his solidarity, adding that, once this was done, they had to come up with a plan that would make some money. "Anger alone will get us nowhere," he told her.

The night they entered the village, in December 1980, they raided 90 homes and Phoolan Devi showed neither compassion nor mercy. She pushed both men and women around, prodding them with the butt of her rifle, threatening to kill their children, just for the pleasure of seeing terror in the eyes of Thakurs. They left the rest of the village untouched.

"You Thakur bastards!" she screamed, as she spat in the faces of men, slapping the women who stood in her way. She demanded to know where the Singh brothers were, when they had last been to the village. "We are here because of them," she informed them. "If they ever come here again, if you ever give them any help again, I will burn your homes to the ground." As the gang left the village with money, silver and gold in the form of jewellery, she grabbed the loudhailer from Man Singh and shouted into the night. "Remember, you Thakur pigs, do not fool with Phoolan Devi. Vikram Mallah *ki jai*!"

The incident attracted the press and newspaper articles began to

appear, placing Phoolan Devi among the most "wanted" bandits. Thakur power and domination had never been challenged in this way before. Until the early 1970s, most dacoit gangs had consisted of upper-caste men, who had provided a degree of protection to those of their community, but now, it seemed, the tables were turning. It was a process that was to dominate the whole of Indian political life throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, with those of the lower castes suddenly aware of their potential for power and their ability to demand fundamental changes at all levels of society.

After the attack on the Thakurs of Baijamau, Phoolan Devi and Man Singh decided to camp near the village of Sindaus.

A reporter writing for The *Onlooker*, an Indian current-affairs magazine, visited the village later and said: "Sindaus has been known for its Phoolan Devi association. Being of a *Gujar–Ahir – Mallah* area, it has precisely the caste-mix which corresponds with the composition of Phoolan's gang. Diwan Gujar, Man Singh and Phoolan being a *Gujar, Ahir* and *Mallah* respectively, the gang gets not only public sympathy in the whole area but also shelter when it needs it."

Phoolan had many contacts in Sindaus, dating back to her time with Vikram Mallah. His death had resulted in a great deal of sympathy for her, much admiration for her act of retribution, so she and Man Singh received a warm welcome, with endless offers of "safe" homes in which to hide, food and anything else they might need. Alert to the dangers surrounding them, Man Singh insisted that the gang sleep in the surrounding jungle; villagers provided them with the best bedding available and two elaborately-cooked meals a day. Phoolan told me that was one occasion on which she really *did* feel like a queen. "They even brought us mosquito-nets!" she said, her eyes bright as a child's.

Sindaus was to be the location for an encounter with the Uttar Pradesh police later on, but in the weeks following the attack on Baijamau Phoolan Devi remained undetected, living a life of leisure, which greatly impressed other members of her gang. They camped under an enormous banyan tree, considered to be sacred. Villagers who passed it paid tribute to the tree and grains of rice,

shells of coconuts and faint traces of yellow and vermilion were reminders of this ritual. Man Singh thought the location was auspicious, believing in the folklore of trees that Major-General Sir William Sleeman recorded in his memoirs, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*:

> The Peepul-tree (*Ficus Indicus*) is everywhere sacred to the gods, who are supposed to sit among its leaves, and listen to the music of their rustling. The deponent takes one of these leaves in his hand, and invokes the god who sits above him, to crush him, or those dear to him, as he crushes the leaf in his hand, if he speaks anything but the truth; he then plucks and crushes the leaf, and states what he has to say.
>
> The large cotton-tree is among the wild tribes of India, the favourite seat of gods still more terrible, because their superintendence is confined exclusively to the neighbourhood; and having their attention less occupied they can venture to make a more minute scrutiny into the conduct of the people immediately around them. The Peepul is occupied by one or other of the Hindu triad, the god of creation, preservation, or destruction, who have the affairs of the universe to look after; but the cotton and other trees are occupied by some minor deities who are vested with the local superintendence over the affairs of a district, or perhaps of a single village.

In footnotes Sleeman adds:

> The sacred trees and plants of India are very numerous. . . . Nearly every village and hamlet has its local ghost, usually the shrine of a childless man, or one whose funeral rites remained for some reason unperformed. In the expressive popular phrase he is "deprived of water". The pious make obligations to his cenotaph twice a year and propitiate his ghost with offerings of water to allay his thirst in the lower world. The primeval serpent-worship is perpetuated in the reverence paid to traditional village-snakes. Of the local

ghosts some are beneficent. Sometimes they are only mischievous, like Robin Goodfellow, and will milk the cows, and sour the milk, or pull your hair, if you wander about at night in certain well-known uncanny places. A more dangerous demon is heard in the crackling of the dry leaves of the date-tree in the night wind; and some trees are haunted by a vampire, who will drag you up and devour you, if you venture near them in the darkness.

At that camp near the village of Sindaus, elated by her success Phoolan Devi told Man Singh she had another idea, which would require Baba Mustaqeem's support. Leaving Sindaus, the gang moved east in search of his gang, having recruited more men to their own. Within days, the two gangs met and celebrated their temporary reunion. Describing this event in her diary, Phoolan said:

"I asked Baba Mustaqeem whether he would come to Jangamajpur. He thought I was mad: there was a police force there and it was a town unknown to us. I said we also wore police uniforms and could use that to our advantage. I said we should do what the police did not expect us to do. They would not be looking for us there, but in the ravines and jungles. Eventually, after some preparation, Baba was persuaded to commit a daylight dacoity. We set off soon after 1 p.m. and reached the town an hour later. No one recognized us. We sent ten men towards the police thana and the rest of us entered the town."

The town square was busy and no one paid any heed to the "police patrol" of roughly fifty men, in dusty uniforms, walking in a double column, rifles on their shoulders. They looked as if they were returning from some routine exercise. Phoolan Devi, her short hair under a police cap, blended with the rest.

As they reached the centre of the square, where a few benches stood under a tree, Mustaqeem raised a loudhailer and announced: "Those who remain calm will not be harmed. We are the friends of the poor. It is the rich who will pay for the action of police dogs who protect them and harass the innocent." People began to scatter

in all directions, running down side streets and into the maze of bazaars beyond. Members of the gang started rounding up hostages, mostly wealthy-looking farmers whose style of dress marked them as probably being Thakurs. The gang tied eight or ten of them together, dumped them by the benches as they struggled against one another, and left two guards to watch over them. If the posse sent to the thana failed to control the police and they turned up in the square, these hostages would be used to hold them at bay.

Mustaqeem then addressed the startled shopkeepers: "Anyone who resists will be shot. Those who attempt to pull their shutters down will have their shops burned to the ground. Don't move. Stay where you are, if you value your lives." As he spoke, other members of the gang were raiding a liquor shop, distributing bottles of rum, whisky, gin, anything they could lay their hands on, to a gathering crowd of young men who watched unafraid, grabbing the hand-outs. Money from tills was being stuffed in cloth bags. Grain merchants, cloth merchants and jewellers were another target. Man Singh ripped open a sack of rice and told people to help themselves. Phoolan entered a jewellers' shop and picked up fistfuls of gold chains, rings, bangles and other ornaments, stuffing them into her cloth bag as she kept her gun pointed at the terrified owner. Meanwhile, the police station was under siege with a handful of constables trapped within.

Phoolan says: "I was so excited. I kept running all over the place with four other members of our gang, enjoying it all immensely. By 6 p.m. we had looted the whole bazaar and held eleven hostages. As we were leaving, I took the megaphone from Baba and proclaimed, 'We are the friends of the poor and the sworn enemies of the rich. Vikram Mallah *ki jai*!'

"Baba and I distributed a lot of money that day. A thousand rupees to one, 2000 to another. Just then a little girl of about eleven came to me and fell at my feet. I asked her whether she knew who I was. I said, 'Are you not afraid?' She replied, 'I know you are Phoolan Devi. I too have five brothers and sisters and my parents are very poor. Won't you please help us? You have given so much to so many, please give me something too.' I took off a gold chain

from round my neck and a gold bracelet from my wrist and gave them to her. She thanked me, blessing me and saying she would pray that nothing happened to me and that I had a long life. Baba Mustaqeem also gave 1000 rupees and then other members of the gang contributed too. The little girl's lap was full of money!

"As soon as we started moving, the police began their pursuit and started shooting. We took cover and the gun battle lasted for about an hour. Not a single member of our gang was hurt and we were able to reach the river without any losses.

"The government had placed a reward of 50,000 rupees on my head, dead or alive. Baba Mustaqeem suggested that the two gangs separate, since we were too large to hide together and the police were following us with such vengeance. I agreed and selected our members, taking 20 out of a total of 50. There were now 21 of us in all and Baba went towards the east while we headed westwards.

"Within fifteen days we had committed another dacoity. It was not easy as the police were everywhere. Still, we managed to get away from this village, Gauri, in the district of Kanpur."

In the months that followed, the Phoolan Devi–Man Singh gang concentrated on earning money to keep themselves going, to pay harbourers and informers who protected them from the police net, to buy ammunition, shoes and uniforms on the black market. They robbed Thakur villages, stopped trucks and lorries that travelled by night on the main link roads skirting the ravines. One method of ambushing trucks was to shoot at their tyres. On other occasions, they dressed as police and flagged them down. Drivers always stopped; they knew that driving through a police cordon in these parts would result in a hail of bullets. The Uttar Pradesh police had been notoriously rough with the local population in their drive to maintain law and order. Often, Phoolan told me, people were relieved that it was only another dacoit gang who would take their money and cargo – which did not belong to them in any case – leaving them personally unharmed. Some even asked to be tied up, she said, so that their employers would not hold them responsible.

They were camping in the district of Etawah in Uttar Pradesh, close by another friendly village, when they received important

news. A young boy from the village had brought them some milk one morning and a message from his uncle. Sri Ram and Lala Ram were to attend a wedding in the village of Behmai. Apparently, rumour had it, Sri Ram had paid for the girl's dowry and would be the guest of honour. Man Singh said it was time to get in touch with Baba Mustaqeem once more.

17

The Behmai Massacre

BEHMAI, REMOTE AND ISOLATED, almost invisible among the ravines that surrounded it, had a population of no more than four hundred people. At the time, nothing overtly connected Phoolan Devi with this secluded village dominated by Thakurs. The name of the village did not appear on any police list and it was so inaccessible that few had even heard of it. It is only after the event that links were sought to establish Phoolan Devi's involvement in what occurred.

Press reports about the "Behmai Massacre" vary, adding much fiction and fantasy to fact. Some details, however, are beyond dispute. It was 14 February 1981 and twenty-two Thakur men were gunned down in cold blood, at almost point-blank range. Twenty died and two survived. They had been lined up along the banks of the Jamuna River, ordered to kneel and were then shot in the back, in a thunder of bullets that resounded in the village where their mothers, wives and children cowered in doorways. Sri Ram and Lala Ram were not among the bodies found by the river.

In her statement to the police at the time of her surrender, Phoolan Devi says she was not there, that she was on the banks of the Betwa River with some members of her gang, keeping watch. She adds: "Some of the members of the gangs that were in Behmai were asked when arrested whether Phoolan had been involved in this massacre and they have said that I was not with them at the time." The officer who recorded this statement on 20 February 1983, Police Inspector R.N. Gupta, then based in Bhind with the CID's Anti-Dacoity squad, added a note to the end of it which reads: "Phoolan Devi has denied any involvement in the Behmai

massacre but her companion, Man Singh, has confirmed his involvement in his statement."

Man Singh's statement, recorded by the same officer on 12 February 1983, says: "Vikram Singh, with whom Phoolan had lived for about a year, was killed by Thakurs at Behmai village. To avenge his death we committed the Behmai massacre. At this time Ram Avtar's gang was also with us. This gang had nineteen men and seven of my men were with them. There was a panchayat on at the village. This village used to give shelter to the gang of Sri Ram and Lala Ram. We had killed about eighteen or nineteen Thakurs in this attack. After this I was not involved. I escaped to the jungles of Hamirpur."

The incident had created a furore in the country. All the Thakurs of Uttar Pradesh were outraged and, being rich farmers, they represented the rural vote throughout the state. The Prime Minister, Mrs Gandhi, could not ignore their reaction. Endless articles and editorials appeared in the national and international press; Phoolan Devi was compared to all kinds of people who make up the legend of banditry and rebellion throughout the world. An American journalist, Jon Bradshaw, who published an article in *Esquire*, said she was "a cross between Angela Davis and Jesse James". Another report pointed out that the Behmai massacre occurred on the same day as the infamous St Valentine's Day Massacre, carried out by Al Capone in Chicago in 1929.

Journalists rushed to the spot and headlines began to appear in the Indian press: "Behmai Villagers Cry For Phoolan's Blood", "Villagers Reel Under Memory of Massacre", "Dacoit Queen Wreaks Vengeance", "Hatred For Thakurs Turned Her Daccit", and so on. The writer of the second article, K. Vikram Rao, went to Behmai and filed his report on 17 February 1983. It was published by the country's leading English-language newspaper, the *Times of India*. I reproduce it in full because he was the first journalist to reach Behmai and speak to those who survived:

> Large contingents of P A C [Provincial Armed Constabulary] have already been posted in different places in this zone.

The district magistrate of Kanpur, Mr Ram Krishna, told this correspondent last night that he feared a reprisal by the rival dacoit gang led by Sri Ram Singh. He had already sought an additional force from the state government to comb the area.

He announced a grant of Rs 1000 each to the dependants of the killed and Rs 500 each for the injured. The minister of state, Mr Shivnath Kushwaha, visited the village on Sunday. The villagers had paralysed road transport at the Rajpur hamlet yesterday, demanding the presence of the chief minister, Mr Vishwanath Pratap Singh, to hear their grievances. The district magistrate and the police superintendent, however, persuaded them to withdraw the blockade.

This hamlet in the ravines of the Yamuna looks desolate, except for armed policemen. This has not instilled the desired degree of confidence among the villagers, as the dacoits, who struck on Saturday, were also clad in khaki and posed as members of the police force.

The villagers broke down as they narrated how the desperadoes descended on the village in broad daylight. The widow of Tulsiram could hardly speak. Her neighbours said his body had been riddled with bullets. Tulsiram's two young sons were also victims of the bandit gang's brutality. All that remains of the family, owning 50 *bighas* of agricultural land, are four small girls and a dazed widow.

This state has never before witnessed such mass murders and dacoity. Police officers recall another gruesome incident in the '50s, when *Thakur* Hargovind Singh was home minister. In that episode, at Sakeet village, in Etah district, a dacoit, Mahabir, gunned down 16 villagers in a single raid.

One of the survivors of the firing, Mr Krishna Swarup, who is now convalescing in a Kanpur hospital, gave a graphic account of the outrage.

The bandit queen, Phoolan Devi, clad in khaki jeans, with a speaker in her hand, asked the villagers to come out of their

houses and gather at a specific spot. She told Mr Krishna Swarup that they would exterminate every family which had offered meals to the rival gang leader, Sri Ram Singh.

Sri Ram Singh has reportedly shot dead dacoit Vikram, the paramour of Phoolan Devi, in August last year. The enmity between Phoolan Devi and Sri Ram Singh has also been traced to the caste factor.

ANTI-DACOIT SQUAD

Within hours of this cold blooded murder of 20 persons in this village on Saturday, bandit queen Phoolan Devi's gang escaped being shot by the anti-dacoit squad. Either the gang was lucky or the squad lacked deft planning.

Going through this village of terror-stricken, grieving people, one could see lighted earthen lamps and hear community prayers for those killed. The list of the gang's victims makes gory reading.

Eighteen-year-old Lal Singh's teenaged widow had not even seen her husband's face because her *gauna* had yet to take place. They were married in June and she was to go to his house after the harvesting season. The young *thakur* was gunned down by the gang on the banks of the Yamuna. In another house, a widow mourned for her husband, Tuli Ram, and two young sons. An invalid, Sohan Singh, cried and asked why Phoolan Devi had spared his life. "Killing a disabled man is no chivalry," remarked the bandit queen pushing him with the butt of her gun, according to an eye witness. But Sohan's brother, Banwari Singh, was taken away by her and shot.

NO MERCY

One villager, Ram Adhar Singh, who fell at the feet of Phoolan Devi and begged for mercy, was carried to the ravines along with others and repeatedly shot.

Even 72 hours after the murders, the soil near the ravines overlooking the Yamuna was soaked in blood. The police covered the area with thorny babool bushes.

Phoolan Devi ordered her hostages to sit down with their backs to a mud wall. Then she directed her men to fire. Within minutes, 20 were dead. Four others with bullet injuries were given up for dead. They are the only witnesses to the crime.

The lack of follow-up action by the police for the next 24 hours has resulted in widespread demonstrations in Oraiyya town nearby. The college students of Oraiyya went on a lightning strike and paralysed traffic on the highway. They demanded that the army replace the state police in searching for the dacoits.

"For five years the police have been searching for these dacoits and for the last 72 hours also they are searching for them," remarked a student. The markets were closed in protest yesterday. Even the census staff is scared of visiting the interior villages.

The Inspector General of Police, Mr Mahendra Singh, who visited the area yesterday evening, told this correspondent that additional forces had been posted. "I am also investigating the complaint of some villagers that the PAC jawans refused to stop playing volleyball and accompany those who had gone on a cycle to seek help."

Phoolan Devi responded in different ways, depending on her feelings towards the interviewer. The *Illustrated Weekly of India*, part of the *Times of India* consortium, published an extract from a 1984 book (*Devi*, by Richard Shears and Isobelle Gidly) which records her reactions at the time:

Q: Why did you take your gang to Behmai?
A: What should I say? What can I say? We all had to take revenge for what Lala Ram and Sri Ram had done. For many days after they killed Vikram they did *mazak* [made mockery] with me.
Q: What do you think about the Thakurs of Behmai?
A: They're dogs. Dirty dogs. I won't say more.

In the *Indian Express*, rival English-language newspaper to the *Times of India*, Chand Joshi reported (in his article "Phoolan now only a Jangle of Bangles", 6 March 1983) that when asked about her involvement in Behmai Phoolan replied:

> "I was not there at the spot on that day and God is my witness. I would not attack a village where my so-called enemies were not even present. I have killed with my own hands only one man in my life, but I will not give you the name. I was on the other side of the village when the massacre took place."

Another journalist following the story for the *Indian Express* had been their correspondent in Madhya Pradesh for some years and knew the terrain well. Referring to the period after Vikram Mallah's death, he asked Phoolan Devi:

> *Q: What happened to you?*
> A: I was taken to Simra. It is in the Jalaun district of UP.
> *Q: You were taken to Behmai or Simra?*
> A: I was not taken to Behmai. I was not there.
> *Q: Who was responsible for Behmai then?*
> A: (Pause) Four other gangs were there – Ram Avtar, Raghunath and Rampal."

Sunday, a popular monthly magazine, of which M. J. Akbar was editor at the time, ran a cover story in their issue dated 15 March 1981. The article was headed, "Phoolan Devi: Queen of Dacoits" and the blurb that highlighted the article read:

> She wears jeans. She carries a sten gun, which she can use with great accuracy and without any mercy. She belongs to a backward caste, and she hates the upper-caste *thakurs* because they have oppressed her and her community. She has been abducted and raped repeatedly by two *thakur* gang leaders who killed her lover to get her. She became a dacoit after she was spurned by her husband and spat upon by society. Today, she is the most powerful, the most

dacoit in Uttar Pradesh. And she will have her revenge on both the *thakurs* and society.

On 14 February she led her gang of backward-caste dacoits to the *thakur* village of Behmai in UP and shot dead all those who had abetted in her capture and rape. And laughing with the pride of a woman who has just taken revenge, taunted the police to capture her, she left. The UP police have mounted a massive hunt for her, but the only casualty, till the moment of writing, has been the chief of UP police, Mahendra Singh, who has had to be removed because of his failure to get Phoolan Devi. Shubhabrata Battacharya went into the desolate ravines between the Ganga and the Jamuna, where Phoolan Devi operates, to find out the fascinating story.

In his article, Shubhabrata Battacharya writes:

> 14 February 1981: The villagers of Behmai see Phoolan after a lapse of five months. But it is no longer the helpless Phoolan they had seen in August. This time Phoolan is wearing a police uniform and along with her are twenty armed men, belonging to the gangs of Ram Avtar Mallah, Balwan Gadaria, Man Singh Yadav, Raghunath Mallah and the supreme leader of all these gangs, "baba" Mustaqeem (though Mustaqeem himself was not present).

Later in the article he says:

> According to the description available with the police, Phoolan has a wheatish complexion, a round face with pimple marks, is of medium height and strong build, has masculine hands and feet and "average" eyes, nose and ears. Such a description does not get anyone very far. When the Kanpur daily, *Aaj* [a Hindi newspaper], published a photograph of Phoolan's younger sister, Ramkali, the police constable at Kalpi who had seen Phoolan, said that Ramkali bore a strong resemblance to her dacoit sister.

The police constable at Kalpi had been wrong. Phoolan Devi looked nothing like Ramkali, who was considered to be the "beauty" of the family. Phoolan looked much more like Rukhmini and Moola, neither of whom wanted anything to do with the police or press. Ramkali, the one Phoolan was least close to in the family, was hounded by photographers and posed for a small fee, allowing them to come to their own conclusions. As a result, the photofit picture of Phoolan Devi which was put together by the police bore no resemblance to her and caused further confusion.

When questioned, Ramkali said in defence of her sister, "*Aaj hamahun laike chalau, khawao, piwao, goli chalibo sikhabau, hamahun khooni ban jaihen.*" (Today you take me along, give me good food and drink, teach me how to use a gun, I too will become a murderer.) It is difficult to know what she meant. Perhaps her own life was so miserable that she would have done the same as Phoolan, given the opportunity; perhaps she was saying that for food, water and the power of the gun, her sister had turned bloodthirsty. No one was sure but they loved it. It was just the sort of thing they wanted to hear about the "reincarnation of Kali". Whatever she meant, Moola and Rukhmini were furious and refused to speak to Ramkali for some years. Perhaps they were unfair to her, misunderstanding her remarks as any reader of the magazine might have done. Later, in March 1981, Ramkali told a reporter from *India Today*, the fortnightly news magazine with a vast circulation throughout the country: "God never makes dacoits or saints. It is only men who make other people into dacoits and saints."

In the samé magazine – practically the whole issue was devoted to this story – there is an insert headed "A boon to Youth Congress (I)" which is revealing of the politics of the time and reads:

> The Behmai incident has been a godsend for the Youth Congress (I) unit in UP, led by Sanjay Singh, MLA, to snipe at the government. Sanjay Singh who is the son-in-law of the brother of Chief Minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, has been ignored by the state leadership for some time after the death of Sanjay Gandhi. Being the son of the *raja* of

Amethi, the constituency of Sanjay Gandhi, Sanjay Singh had enjoyed top patronage during Sanjay Gandhi's life-time. He, therefore, lost no time in attacking the state government after the Behmai massacre and demanding the sacking of the Inspector General of Police, Mahendra Singh. A day later, Mahendra Singh was removed from the post of IGP.

That was not all. On 25 February, when the Chief Minister went to Bhogipur to condole the death of Police Inspector Moolchand who had died in an encounter, Sanjay Singh was visiting Behmai along with Kanpur MLA, Bhoodar Mishra, and Youth Congress (I) leader, Jagadambika pal. He had visited Bhognipur hours before the CM's arrival and held a meeting with the new Inspector General of Police, N. K. Verma, at the Bhognipur Inspection Bungalow.

At Behmai, Sanjay Singh offered to pay for five guns to be given to those whom the police approved. This was a thoughtful gesture. For, in Behmai, the *thakurs* are not so poor as to accept the *dhotis* and blankets which were being offered by the government. What they need is guns, and anybody prepared to give them this wins their hearts."

Jon Bradshaw recorded another "eye-witness" report:

"She was cruel," said Muhti. "She was passionate. She was filled with a terrible rage, like a deep thirst that cannot be slaked. I remember going to her camp on the other side of the Chambal River to sell her guns and ammunition. She wasn't there. She was out on a robbery. I had never seen her before, and when she returned my heart went to my head. I was dizzy with desire.

"She was nearly six feet tall, believe me, at least, and her hair was the colour of dried blood. I swear to you, on the head of my son, a night with that woman would be like drinking the most delectable deadly poison."

Further in the article he adds:

> "Muhti," I said, "in cases of this kind, I have a standard policy. One thousand rupees for the truth, 200 rupees for lies, and 500 for exaggerations."
>
> I gave him the money and Muhti smiled. "Thank you, sahib," he said. "The 500 rupees will help to put my mythical son through school."

Richard Shears and Isobelle Gidly describe the Behmai Massacre in their book *Devi*, and come up with an interesting detail. They spoke to the two survivors of the incident, both of whom had been wounded and presumed to be dead. They had been saved only because the bodies of other dead men fell on top of them when the shooting started, shielding them from further bullets. Both Krishna Swarup and Dev Prayag Singh told these two reporters that, at the river, they had not seen Phoolan Devi. Ram Avtar, they said, seemed to be in control of the situation and gave the orders. "Kill the fuckers!" he had shouted. Krishna Swarup had felt a pain in his shoulder and lost conciousness. Dev Prayag Singh was hit several times in the leg and also in the chest but remained aware of what surrounded him. He recalled Ram Avtar shouting into the air, after firing another shot into the tangle of bodies, "Here is your revenge, Phoolan Devi!"

In a letter she sent to me from prison, Phoolan Devi said: "It is difficult to speak about the events that took place in Behmai because my letters to you pass through too many hands. Also what I am writing for you [the diary] is read by many and written by people I do not know so well. What can I say? You know how it is: if a woman does something, men feel they have to prove themselves to be superior and therefore go further. It is true that I wanted to avenge Vikram's death. Many people supported this feeling in me, over many months, and I cannot begin to point fingers at them now. All I can tell you is that I wanted to kill Sri Ram and Lala Ram but they were not among the dead, as you know. I do not believe in killing people without a positive reason

but the situation got out of control and, in the eyes of Durga Mata, I am innocent of these deaths."

In the months that followed, articles kept appearing in the press. A local Hindi newspaper, *Jagran*, of little reputation nationally, printed a letter they said they had received from Phoolan Devi. It was unsigned. The fact that anybody could have sent it didn't seem to bother them at all. The English-language press in India, equally unscrupulous, picked it up despite uncertainty about its source and headlines began to appear: "Total War Threat by Phoolan", "Phoolan Gives Threat". Phoolan Devi denies being the author of the letter; however, the effect it had was to inflame communal feelings in the area. One part of it, reproduced by the *Times of India*, on 1 March 1981, focused on this aspect:

> The letter added: "The dependants of those killed in Behmai village each have been given Rs 10,000. Were the Mallahs who were burnt alive not human too? Thakurs have declared that they will pick up Mallahs and kill them one by one. I warn that if one Mallah is killed, a hundred Thakurs will be killed by my gang."

As a result, caste tensions throughout Uttar Pradesh intensified and Phoolan Devi gained the reputation of being a cold-blooded, ruthless murderer. She had been tried and condemned by the press.

Those who remained in Behmai shaved their heads as a symbol of their loss; it became a village made up predominantly of women and children. The only men to escape the shooting were those who had left the village earlier that morning to escort the baraat from a neighbouring village. Apparently, an informant had rushed down the approach road and warned the wedding procession to turn back. Reports of the massacre remain confusing but, to clarify the basic facts, 22 Thakur men were shot, 20 died and two survived. Both Krishna Swarup and Dev Prayag Singh took their families and left the village soon after their recovery, fearful of further retribution after all the exposure they had received in the press.

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Aftermath

MUSTAQEEM WAS LIVID. He had contributed some of his men to the raid for the ritual of revenge but had not been there himself. He had seen press photographs of the carnage and listened to radio reports that spoke of the political reaction. From everyone's point of view – except perhaps the Singh brothers', who had not been there – Behmai was a disaster.

"Have you all gone mad?" Mustaqeem shouted, when the gangs assembled again about a week later. "Look what you've done. There are thousands of police pouring into this valley from all directions. No one is safe because of *you*!" he screamed at Phoolan Devi.

"It was not my decision, Baba. Anyway what is done is done. You should take it like a man," she replied sullenly.

"I don't need any advice from you, Phoolan Devi," Mustaqeem snapped back. "I always said you would bring bad luck and you have. And you," he yelled, turning to Man Singh, who sat in silence next to Ram Avtar and Balwan Singh. "You'll end up like Vikram Mallah. Dead, I tell you, dead!"

"Those Thakur dogs asked for it," ventured Ram Autar.

"And *you've* asked for police dogs to climb on our backs," Mustaqeem retorted, furious, fully aware of the consequences they would have to face.

Balwan Singh tried to bring some calm to the situation and suggested that they split up into twos and threes. The two women, Phoolan Devi and Meera Thakur (his lover), he said should go into hiding together, finding work as labourers in some small town. Hundreds of village women did this and contractors asked few

questions. The police would not be looking for them in such a setting; they would not be detected; their faces were not known to either press or police; he had seen the photofit picture of Phoolan and it looked nothing like her; Meera Thakur had never been photographed either. As he spoke, Phoolan says, she thought of Vikram Mallah's words, "Never let anyone take your picture," he had said when she wanted to be photographed with him in a tiny booth in Kanpur, which had advertised postcard-size pictures, in colour, for 20 rupees.

"What I do," Balwan was saying, "is show my face in a village where I know the police have informers. I pass through the village and tell people I'm camping on the outskirts. I even pay someone to bring me food later – or some gesture like that. Then I walk at least twenty kos away from there without stopping. It always confuses the police!" he said, laughing, but Mustaqeem was in no mood to laugh.

Glaring at Balwan, he said, still in a rage, "I'm going to meet my cousin Immamuddin and then I'll go to Bombay. He knows people there. You can do as you want."

"Surely Bombay will not be safe," Man Singh said with concern. "*Any* place is safer than here, after what you fools have just done!" was the response.

The gangs camped there for the night under heavy guard. Mustaqeem positioned men at vantage points, high up on ravine ridges, on look out for the telltale lights of police jeeps. The night passed without incident as Phoolan Devi prepared herself to leave the following morning with Meera Thakur. Balwan was right, Man Singh told her, it would be safer that way, at least for a few weeks. He would hide in the ravines with some of their own men and keep moving, for the sake of safety. They would not go far, he assured her, as they discussed ways in which to keep in touch. Phoolan told him to cut his hair, which made him easy to identify, but he laughed, saying, "Don't worry, these times will pass." They huddled close together and slept, covering themselves with a thick, coarse blanket. It was extremely cold that night in February 1981. Dreading their separation, Phoolan Devi said, "You take the

blanket," as he was falling asleep. He held her tight and replied, "Don't worry, I'll be all right."

The next morning, soon after dawn, having drunk some tea made by male members of the gang and eaten two dry rotis, Phoolan Devi set off with Meera Thakur. They were both dressed in cotton saris, bought from some sympathizer in a neighbouring village. She embraced Man Singh and touched Baba Mustaqeem's feet. It was the last time she was to see the Muslim bandit chief. She told him to see *Sholay* if he went to Bombay, the only film she had ever seen herself. Despite his rage of the previous day, Mustaqeem blessed the women and wished them luck. Man Singh and Balwan Singh accompanied them part of the way, in silence, leaving them where the ravines ended, to cross flat fields in order to catch a bus on the main highway, linking Kanpur to Agra.

They were to meet a sympathetic bricklayer, who would find them work on some building site in a small town. No one on the bus, or at the bus stop where they waited for more than an hour, paid them any attention.

For a week or more they worked carrying headloads of bricks, together with a score of other village women, earning eight rupees a day. At night, they would walk a minimum of two hours, in different directions each day for the sake of caution. Enough mistakes had already been made and the police presence in the area was alarmingly visible. In reality, they were quite far removed from where the Anti-Dacoity squads were operating, combing the terrain that surrounded every remote village with which, according to police files, Phoolan Devi had ever been associated.

After the women's departure, the men also moved on with their respective gangs. Mustaqeem advised that they split into twos and threes, no more, and abandon all thoughts of any further operations for a while. They would meet again when the storm had died down. Man Singh went east, towards Rewa in Madhya Pradesh where the police were less active than they were in Uttar Pradesh.

Balwan Singh headed south with his men and entered the village of Behta, where he had reliable suppliers and informers. His plan was to buy some essentials for the men before they broke into smaller

groups. By the time they reached their destination, not having eaten all day, their legs were heavy with fatigue. Their most trusted "contact", a young man in his early twenties, welcomed them like returning heroes. Within a couple of hours he got them all they needed. His wife started cooking, as he implored them to rest awhile and eat something before moving on. The village was quiet and peaceful, with the sound of children at play in dusty alleyways.

Unknown to them, a police informer in the village had recognized Balwan Singh and another member of his gang. He had rushed to the nearest police station with the news, eager to collect his reward. As the gang sat down to eat, another informer, this time someone on their side, had rushed into the house saying that a police contingent was entering the village. Grabbing their weapons, Balwan and his men cut through the village to the safety of the surrounding ravines, firing shots at the police patrol. The police gave chase. Had Balwan held his fire, he might have escaped, but he didn't and what followed is well recorded in Shears' and Gidly's book *Devi*:

> The chase lasted all day, covering 22 miles of rugged terrain. At the Betwa River, which meets the Yamuna at Hamirpur, some of the dacoits ran into a quarry while three took up positions and waited for the policemen. As the officers came into view the bandits fired, hitting Inspector Moolchand in the leg. Another officer, Sub-Inspector Udenia, dived for cover, pulling Moolchand with him. A group of armed police approached from another direction and, seeing the two crouched behind a mound, believed them to be baghis and readied their weapons. Moolchand and Udenia threw up their hands, shouting that they were police. But the others, thinking this to be a trick, opened fire and Moolchand was hit again, this time by his own men. The dacoits, who were much closer to Moolchand and Udenia, crawled up to Moolchand, grabbed his rifle and put a bullet in his head, while Udenia fled. Realizing their terrible mistake, the armed police threw grenades at the

dacoits and killed six of them, including Balwan Singh who was, in fact, dressed in a police superintendent's uniform.

Unaware of her lover's death, Meera Thakur told Phoolan Devi that she had had enough of carrying bricks and was going back to the ravines to rejoin Balwan. Phoolan too was missing Man Singh and found her daily routine pointless, depressing and exhausting. That Saturday, they collected their wages and left town. Before setting off in different directions, they embraced in a crowded bus station alive to the voice of vendors, flies buzzing all around them, plagued by various touts and fortune-tellers. They were not to see each other again.

In her search for Balwan, Meera Thakur met up with other members of his gang, who told her what had happened. Before she could absorb or recover from her grief, she too was shot dead in an encounter with the Uttar Pradesh police. Her death caused a minor political storm. The police, having stripped her naked, paraded her body on a handcart through the streets of a small town in Uttar Pradesh. Although she had not been at Behmai, her association with Balwan condemned her. Grotesque photographs appeared in several newspapers and prominent members of the public and a number of journalists were outraged, accusing the police of brutal obscenity. Enquiries were called for at press conferences and questions were raised in parliament. Sections of the police force, mostly senior officers, also felt it was an outrage. Mr Pathak, for instance, who was the DIG of Gwalior when I met him, said, "Why naked? Would they have done that to a man?"

At the time of Meera Thakur's death, Phoolan Devi and Man Singh had regrouped and were operating with six other men in the gang, some of whom had been at Behmai.

"We were eight altogether," she said later from jail. "We committed a dacoity in Bhadroli village in the Agra district but it took us months before we succeeded. Every time we approached this place, the villagers would open fire, preventing us from entering the village, so we decided on a plan to deceive them. We sent two of our members, trussed up, towards the village. The rest

of us, dressed as policemen, followed them, cautioning the villagers over a loudhailer that these two men were members of Phoolan Devi's gang who had escaped from police custody and were to be held till the jeeps arrived.

"On hearing this the pradhan of this Thakur village caught the two men and locked them up in a room. When we reached his house, the pradhan pleaded with us, saying he should be rewarded for his assistance to the police. He would not be safe, he said, the village would not be safe if Phoolan Devi ever got to know that he assisted with the arrest of two of her men. He wanted extra licences for arms. We consented but asked him to show us the licences already in his possession. He summoned his servant and told him to show us the guns and the licences. These included five rifles, three .315s, two .306s and three double-barrelled 12-bore rifles, which we confiscated. Then I took off my police cap and let down my hair. When he recognized me, the pradhan told us to take all his gold and silver but to spare his life. I untied our gang members, tied up the pradhan with the same rope and locked him in a room, leaving a note by his side saying, 'Ill-gotten wealth, accumulated by sucking the blood of the poor will always be lost.'

"While my companions ransacked the house, I stood on top of it with a loudhailer. I announced to the village that this was Phoolan Devi's gang. I reassured them that we were only interested in the pradhan and his wealth and would not touch anyone else. We were in a good mood and sang as we worked. Not a soul moved or spoke. The village was like a ghost town. Even the bus-stop was quiet.

"When we had taken everything we could, we left the village, talking to villagers on the way. The pradhan, some said, was also the moneylender and charged double the interest others did in the area. Hearing this, I distributed some of his wealth among them.

"But just as we crossed the road, we saw two truck loads of PAC jawans. They opened fire and, since the surrounding area was flat land without any hiding-place, we had to start shooting back. Whenever we were surrounded without any hope of escape, we followed the same strategy – we would throw all our loot on the

ground and run. The police, being as they are, would fall upon the gold and silver, each man for himself, instead of following us. This is what we did now and managed to make our escape. That was the closest I ever came to being shot by the police in a face to face encounter.

"After travelling for a few days, we came to Etawah district and were on our way to the temple when I was told that Baba Ghanshyam wanted to meet me and had been waiting in the area for many days. It was reassuring to be in touch with other gangs so I said I was eager to meet him too. I sent two of our men with this messenger, to lead him to our camp. They came back accompanied by five men – Baba Ghanshyam, his brother Karan Singh and three others whom I did not recognize. We were very happy to see each other and even fired a few rounds in celebration. Baba Ghanshyam's father had been arrested by the police and he wanted us to help set him free. I vowed in the name of the goddess Bhagwati that we would give him all the help we could. In the evening, we took leave of each other and left for the district of Bhind in Madhya Pradesh. Then one day we heard over the radio that Baba Mustaqeem had been killed. Both Man Singh and I felt devastated."

The name Mustaqeem means "the firm one", "the strong, stable, unbending one". Mustaqeem had been their mentor and, Phoolan says, the news of his death made them feel the sudden weight of loneliness and fear. At first, she tried to comfort Man Singh, as she had comforted Vikram when Bharat and Madho were killed. "Newspapers lie," she said, but Man Singh paid little heed, pointing out that even the police couldn't get away with reporting such a fact unless it was true. The whole gang became despondent and their spirits plummeted.

Recalling these times in her diary, Phoolan said: "We decided to confirm the news by going to Baba's village, Galauli. We travelled the whole night and reached Galauli at 4 a.m. and hid in the jungle till 6 p.m. Then one of Baba's trusted men, Suntan, came to us. He had been in charge of all Baba's wealth. He started weeping as soon as he saw us and said it was our duty to avenge his death. I asked

him where all the other baghis were. He said that Baba's brother, Muslim, had taken over the gang and they were somewhere in the district of Agra. Then he fed us and took us to hide in his house. He said we should stay for a couple of days to plan our next move. He said he had collected a pile of weapons for us. Somehow I became suspicious and said we preferred to sleep in the forest, adding that we were jungle-dwellers by habit. After he left, I discussed him with the rest of the gang but they thought he was all right and reminded me that he had been one of Baba's most trusted friends. After some discussion, we decided to show good faith and accept his offer. We also wanted to enter the village in order to pay our respects to Baba's relatives.

"That night, after we had offered prayers with the rest of the family, Suntan came to see me around midnight, wanting to know how much money I had. I told him I had about 50,000 to 60,000 rupees, a gold chain and a ring. I asked him why he wished to know. He said Baba had been killed at the village of Dastampur and that we could not possibly go there on foot. The driver of the car that was to take us wanted money, not just for the journey but for the car. He was prepared to sell it to us. He said it was worth two lakhs (200,000 rupees). I had no idea about car prices, so I handed him all the money I had, the gold chain and the ring. Man Singh gave 20,000 rupees and Baladin 15,000. I did not know that he had already collected money from other members of the gang, telling them I had asked him to. I was still suspicious and told Man Singh that he was up to something. Both Man Singh and Baladin disagreed. They said he was a good, straightforward man and would work in our interest, pointing out that owning a car would be useful and when we had finished with it, we could get our money back by selling it in Kanpur.

"A little later the village pandit came and handed me a gun, saying that I should keep this self-loading rifle and hand over my semi-automatic rifle, for safe-keeping, because it was too heavy. I thanked him, saying I would give him my rifle in the morning, and I kept both. He left for Kalpi, saying he was going to arrange for the car we had paid for since he was the one who knew the owner.

"I wanted to run as soon as he left but Man Singh and Baladin refused. The pandit returned at 4 a.m. bringing some men with him. He introduced them as the owners of the car and said he had brought them so that we could discuss the details with them ourselves. I was suspicious and told the men they looked more like police officers to me. It was now 6 a.m.

"The pandit and the men said they wanted to have a wash and relieve themselves in the fields and would return soon so that we could eat together. I was extremely worried and restless so went up to the terrace roof for some fresh air. In trees, on roof tops, in helmets and full gear, well prepared, I saw policemen everywhere. In a state of shock and fear, I rushed down and told Man Singh we were surrounded and now only Durga Mata could save us.

"Hurriedly, we changed out of our khaki clothes. Man Singh and Baladin got into the pandit's kurta-pajama and I wore a sari belonging to his sister. Fortunately, there was no one in the house, otherwise I would surely have killed them. I was furious that the pandit had betrayed us to the police. On our hands and knees, we reached the other households where other members of our gang were hidden and managed to warn them – or at least those who were there. I am sure we were seen by police many times but since they expected us to be in khaki, they did not recognize us.

"After about half an hour, the police started firing at the pandit's house. Over a loudhailer, they asked me to come out of the house, swearing that they would not kill me. The voice identified itself as the Inspector-General of Police. When there was no response from the pandit's house, the police laid siege to the house next door, where three of our gang members had been staying. They kicked in the door and started firing into the house. Then more police entered the house but they came out empty-handed and the three of us decided to move further away.

"Around 1 p.m. the voice of the IGP came over the loudhailer again, telling all the women and children to come out of their homes for safety. He said they were going to blast the village with a volley of fire so that not even a dog would be left alive. When the village was emptied of all its inhabitants, the police set fire to one of

the huts, hoping to smoke us out. We could see the police everywhere, many still on rooftops and in trees. At one stage they even brought a helicopter, which we watched as it circled over the village and its surrounding jungle. At night, the police lit up the whole village with special lights, bright enough to read by.

"We thought this time we could not possibly be saved. It was the next day, eight o'clock at night and we were all desperate for a drink of water. I noticed a pitcher in a corner of the Masjid (mosque): there was some water in it. So, calling on Durga Mata, I crawled to it and we managed to quench our thirst. While looking for the water, I had also seen the ruins of a house just behind the Masjid. I told Man Singh and Baladin that our chances of survival were very slim and suggested we build a trench in those ruins and hide ourselves as long as we could. Man Singh said he would rather die fighting than be killed in hiding. I said there were too many policemen for us to contend with and we should use our intelligence. There was no glory in death. Eventually, I persuaded them and we made our way to the ruins. We dug a deep pit and I made them lie down in it. Then I covered them with sand and dry shrubs, over which I pulled columns of stone from the ruins, laying them across the trench. Then I did the same for myself.

"By the morning, the police had started a house-to-house search. Several policemen walked over us without discovering our hiding-place. The search went on for hours as we crouched there in the rubble. Eventually, the villagers started returning, as the main body of police were pulling out. At one point, an old woman arrived and began squatting over our hiding-place to relieve herself. We all sat up and asked whether the police had left the village. She started screaming that the place was haunted! She made such a noise, we were sure we would be discovered, so we climbed out of the trench and moved to another place.

"We could see policemen drinking water from the well. When they walked away in the opposite direction, we ran for our lives and within half an hour we were also drinking water, from the Jamuna. As we started towards the jungle, I told Man Singh and Baladin that we should not leave without offering a salutation to the

Inspector-General of Police. So we stood on top of a small hill, on the outskirts of the village, and fired about fifteen rounds into the air. It was now around 10 a.m. After that we started to run."

For Phoolan Devi, Man Singh and Baladin it was a lucky escape. Other members of their gang were not so fortunate.

19

Escape

LIKE MUSTAQEEM, Malkhan Singh had been furious about Behmai. A massive police presence in the ravines meant that his own operations had been seriously hindered. He cursed Phoolan Devi many times over, knowing that Vikram Mallah's death had been central to the vengeance wreaked on the Thakurs of Behmai and he associated that vengeance with Phoolan Devi, regardless of what her actual role in it had been. At the council meeting of gang leaders, towards the end of 1980, he had endorsed the decision on the basis that the Singh brothers were suspected of being police informers, on the UP side of the border. He could not have done otherwise, given his own status as the "Godfather", known to support just causes. He had not anticipated such carnage and began to refer to Phoolan Devi as "that Sudra whore".

Essentially from the same caste, but of a higher sub-caste, he regarded himself as far superior to the Mallahs. In addition, he had little respect for women at a personal level, although he imitated the behaviour of other bandit leaders of any repute, who had established a ritual of "showing respect to women", at least in public. Basically, he thought women were inferior beings.

I met him once, briefly, in Gwalior Central Jail and quickly formed this impression, despite the fact that, on the surface, he was extremely polite. His attitude to me had probably also been influenced by the knowledge that I was there, fundamentally, to see Phoolan Devi, for whom he still had contempt.

In 1981, he commanded the largest single gang in the valley, consisting of some seventy men, and was referred to in the press as the "Bandit King". Rumour had it that he owned an inflatable boat

which was "from abroad". The import licence was said to be in the name of some politician whom he had supported at election time, delivering "block votes" from certain villages under his influence. The boat, which the gang was said to carry everywhere with it, enabled Malkhan to keep all his river crossings a secret, moving only by night. Although local fishermen, who ferried dacoit gangs up and down and across the rivers of the valley, rarely informed the police of their movements, they were liable to talk loosely. Village life is such that any event adds to the day's excitement and becomes a talking point, making gangs vulnerable to informers who thrive on gossip; meeting the "Bandit King" inevitably led to a great deal of such talk, lending glamour to the storyteller.

A member of Malkhan's gang, Sobaran Singh, a young man who worshipped his leader, suggested that they eliminate the woman who called herself Dasyu Sundari, or "Beautiful Bandit". Malkhan had been curt with him, saying he did not kill women and besides, Phoolan Devi had done nothing against him personally or directly. However, he agreed, if someone were to get rid of her the valley would be free of the police force that now hounded them round the clock.

Malkhan's comments circled in Sobaran Singh's head, dominating his thoughts. One day he decided to do Malkhan a personal favour by dealing with the matter himself. Having reached this decision, he took off for Galauli, telling Malkhan he needed some time off to see his family over a domestic problem.

At Galauli, he received a warm welcome as a member of Malkhan Singh's gang who had come to pay his respects. Phoolan Devi and Man Singh had not arrived but were expected. Instead he was introduced to two other members of her gang, Laltu and Ram Shankar, with whom he struck up a friendship. They too were waiting for Phoolan and Man Singh, and Sobaran decided that he had found the lead he was looking for. With them, he was treated as an honoured guest and, when night fell, Laltu suggested he accompany them to a neighbouring village, Sirauli, where they were staying for the sake of safety. Galauli, being Mustaqeem's village, was well known to the police.

The next morning, Laltu informed him that Phoolan Devi and Man Singh were expected soon and that a messenger from Galauli would bring them information when they arrived. Sobaran decided to stick close to these men, who were about to lead him to the woman he had come to kill. Once it was over, Malkhan would be grateful and admire his initiative. He was sure of that.

Unknown to him, that same afternoon of 30 March 1981, Sub-Inspector Yadav received a telephone call from one of his informers tipping him off that Phoolan Devi and Man Singh were said to be near either Galauli or Sirauli. The policeman thought it over and came to the conclusion that Galauli was too obvious; he would try Sirauli first. He got on the police radio and rounded up a commando force of fifteen highly-trained men, armed with light machine-guns and grenades. Late that afternoon, they set out in police jeeps, pulling up in the cover of high grass, not far from the village. Yadav's informer had already told him in which of the two possible "safe" houses Phoolan Devi was likely to be. He told his men, "Cover them both and hit them together. There must be no mistakes."

Inside one of these houses, Laltu, Ram Shankar and Sobaran had just sat down to eat, in a relaxed atmosphere of casual banter, when the door was kicked in and a hail of bullets sprayed the room. Ram Shankar apparently tried to reach for his gun but was shot through the chest. Laltu died before he had time to move and Sobaran's body was riddled with bullets, his mouth full of food.

Sub-Inspector Yadav's disappointment that Phoolan Devi was not among the blood-stained corpses he examined was mitigated by the fact that his men had gunned down three members of her gang and he sent out wireless messages immediately, to all concerned. Three members of "IR 40" – Inter-Range 40 was the code name in UP for Phoolan Devi's gang – had been "successfully eliminated", he said, without naming the men because he did not know who they were. He then ordered that the bodies be put on public display in the village square.

Eager to earn their stripes, the police circulated this information to the media and other government agencies. On 1 April 1981, a report appeared in the *Hindustan Times*, a Delhi-based newspaper, saying:

Three members of the most sought-after dacoit gang, led by nineteen-year-old bandit beauty Phoolan Devi, were killed in an encounter with police in the Jalaun district. The elusive Phoolan Devi is believed to be among those killed, but no official confirmation is so far available from Jalaun.

In Galauli, a short distance away from Sirauli, considered to be the "twin" villages of the district, police had already mounted a massive paramilitary operation and although Phoolan, Man Singh and Baladin managed to escape, Jage and Kallu Lalla, two other members of their gang, were found and shot. Their bodies too were put on public display.

At the end of it all, the authorities had to admit that, far from eliminating Phoolan Devi, they had not even caught a glimpse of her. In fact, no one was sure whether she had been in the area at all. They had no idea how close they had come to achieving their objective.

The gangs were fragmented, splintered into small groups constantly on the run. Informers on both sides thrived. Just as the police were prepared to pay for information, gang leaders also paid handsomely to monitor police movements in the ravines. Recalling the time, Phoolan Devi comments:

"We reached the Betwa River one evening, after being on the run the whole day. We were just 20 kos away from Ghamna, the village towards which we were walking, when we received information that the police were heading the same way so we had to change direction. After many more hours of walking, we reached the jungles of Panna-Chhatarpur. We were tired and hungry and did not have a single *paisa* between us. If someone gave us food, we ate, but most of the time we went hungry. After a few days of this, Baladin went to visit his sister, but on his way to her village he was arrested by the police and sent to jail. Now there were only two of us left."

Around this time, two Delhi-based journalists, Kalyan Mukherjee and Brij Raj Singh, were researching the story and later published a book entitled *Malkhan : The Story of a Bandit King*.

They also assisted the police in negotiating the terms of Malkhan's eventual surrender in 1982 and received the reward of seventy thousand rupees for their efforts. Referring to the time in question, they wrote:

> Back in Lucknow, Vishwanath Pratap Singh [the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh at the time] remarked, "You will see the results soon." He also said his government would give thought to a proposal of *flooding the ravines*; though it would not be possible to flood the entire area, he said, such a measure was possible in selected areas. While those who knew better snickered in their sleeves at the idea, Vishwanath Pratap Singh was not alone in coming out with such wild ideas: at one of the meetings the SP of Hamirpur, Vikram Singh, had suggested letting loose in the ravines leopards trained to identify bandits! Another officer proposed bringing in the Indian Air Force to strafe the bandits in the ravines – a war from the skies. . . .
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> The meetings went on and their minutes piled up. However, one important change had taken place: in the encounters in the *daang* [forest] the police had come across the sophisticated firepower of the gangs. In a meeting of March 28 at Delhi, a demand for increased firepower was made, and consequently 600 SLRs [self-loading rifles], 150 light machine-guns, 20 mortar launchers and ammunition valued at forty lakh rupees [i.e. Rs 4,000,000] was sanctioned for the Madhya Pradesh police. Binoculars, VHF sets and vehicles were obtained from various paramilitary organizations.
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> In April 1981 the Madhya Pradesh government promulgated the Anti-Dacoity Ordinance, giving sweeping powers to the police to arrest harbourers and informers on mere suspicion. The ordinance allowed for seizure of property and imprisonment for a period of four months without bail and sentences of ten years for the harbourers. . . .

The death squads of Uttar Pradesh Police had started their work in the beginning of 1980, ending the year with the claim of killing one thousand *badmashes* – the term they use to describe bandits. The Chambal bled as a spate of police killings disfigured the countryside of UP; as human life became nothing more than numbers in a police register. The lies of the UP police became so bloated with the desire to please the Chief Minister that UP became a state caught in a Brownian motion of death. The men in khaki turned the bandit districts of the state into a forest where human beings were hunted. In a space of six months, more than seven hundred "bandits" were killed; five thousand were arrested in "encounters". The real bandits hit back in Aliganj, Mainpuri, Pawa-Pawta, Agra, Etawah, killing innocent villagers and gunning down policemen, and an unprecedented orgy of blood engulfed the Chambal.

While in Madhya Pradesh there was still some semblance of sanity, the fake "encounters" being few, Uttar Pradesh had become a no man's land – a headless monster gone berserk. To go by police claims, one out of every five hundred adult men in the state had become a bandit.

Many years later, in 1987, I visited the village of Galauli on Phoolan's recommendation, accompanied by her mother and brother. It was a relatively large village with a population of about 11,000 and far more urbanized than many I had been to, although still very much a "ravine village". Approachable by road, it was primarily a Muslim stronghold that included a minority of low-caste Hindu families. I was told there had been no history of any conflict between the two communities.

We went to what had been the home of Baba Mustaqeem. His relatives still occupied the house, the same house to which Mannu had taken Phoolan Devi in 1979 after Vikram Mallah's death. The house, its inner courtyard and terraces seemed familiar from Mannu's descriptions, and Muslim manners were as polite and ceremonial as he had experienced. When I spoke of Mustaqeem, I

was corrected by one of the young men present who said I should refer to him as *Baba* Mustaqeem because he had not been an ordinary man. While we ate an elaborately cooked meal, which included mutton cooked with beetroot, quite an extraordinary and exquisite taste, different kinds of vegetables, dal, rice and freshly roasted rotis, I tried to explain my intentions. The same driver who had accompanied me to Nagina, Lakshman Rao, was with us and was treated with the same respect. By now he had become a firm ally. Employed by the Indian Tourism Department Corporation, he was unused to such treatment from the hosts of those he drove around as part of his job. Everywhere we went, he was treated as an equal and, intent on helping me with my project, he disappeared after lunch and came back with two young men, both Muslim, whom he introduced to me as "members of Baba's gang". I asked them if they had, in fact, been with Mustaqeem. They said they had protected his interests in the village, provided safe houses and carried messages but had never lived with him in the ravines and had never committed any crime.

They were obviously close to the family and we were ushered on to one of the upper terraces, over which a large tree hung like a canopy. We talked for hours, and then walked through the village. They showed me the place where the dead men, Jage and Kallu Lalla, had been put on display, their bodies festering over three days, covered with flies. They also showed me the tree from which they themselves had been hung, upside down, by the police and questioned about the whereabouts of Phoolan Devi, soon after the killings in Sirauli and Galauli. Such treatment, they said, was a common form of torture in the area, referred to locally as the Laxman Jhula, a euphemism which comes from the mythological god figure, Laxman, brother of Ram, who was made to swing from tree to tree by the Monkey God, Hanuman, in *The Ramayana*, one of the two central epics of the Hindu religion. They spoke of these events in a surprisingly matter-of-fact way. Much of what I have learnt about Baba Mustaqeem comes from them. They showed me the ruins under which Phoolan, Man Singh and Baladin had hidden themselves as if it were an historical spot, of tourist interest.

Despite their experience on the Laxman Jhula, when they had been swung from side to side, the blood rushing to their heads in a terrible way; despite the beating they had received under such conditions; despite all the questions thrown at them while they were being tortured in this manner; they had remained silent, preferring death to betrayal. When I said, "Phoolan Devi has good friends in people like you," they replied: "We did it for Baba, in memory of Baba. We hardly knew Phoolan Devi." The bandit chief commanded their loyalty even in death.

I asked them to tell me how Baba had been killed. What follows is based partly on the notes I took at the time and also information gathered from other press reports of the incident.

Mustaqeem had gone to his cousin's village as planned. They had discussed the possibility of going to Bombay and Immamuddin, who hero-worshipped his baghi relative, agreed to accompany him. Before leaving, Mustaqeem wanted to leave some money with his brother in the village of Dastampur, for the upkeep of his family while he was away.

Mustaqeem cut his hair, which he had worn much as Man Singh did, shaved his beard, reshaping his moustache and put on a white kurta-pajama. Placing his revolver in his cousin's zipper bag and strapping all the money he had round his thigh, they set off by bus towards Dastampur.

"He looked so completely transformed," said Salim, one of the two men telling the story, "that we all thought he'd be safe. Even face to face, the police would not have recognized him."

The bus only went as far as Galuapur, in the Kanpur district of UP, from where his brother's village was within walking distance.

That morning, police headquarters in Lucknow circulated a list of villages whose access roads were to be watched and instructed that anyone travelling these pathways was to be stopped and questioned. Sub-Inspector Hariram Pal and Constable Hari Singh were riding away from the village on bicycles when they saw two men walking towards them. The surrounding landscape was flat and barren for miles around, so escape would not have been possible. Mustaqeem and Immamuddin kept walking, realizing

there was no other option, but when the men drew up alongside each other and the police asked where they were going, the fear on Immamuddin's face was apparent and made them instantly suspicious. Getting off their bicycles, they approached him, ignoring Mustaqeem and asked him further questions. Barely able to speak out of terror, he pointed towards the village and muttered something.

"What's in the bag?" the police demanded to know, instructing him to open it.

"Clothes," he said, his hands shaking as he fumbled with the zip.

At this point, Mustaqeem rushed forward in an attempt to grab the revolver from his cousin's bag but the police had already seen it and, in the struggle that followed, the gun went off, attracting the attention of a group of young men, students from the village, who had been walking ahead. They turned back to see what was happening.

When they reached the spot, the struggle between the four men had become quite violent. Mustaqeem had the Sub-Inspector pinned down, having broken the rifle across his back: the constable and Immamuddin were still struggling. The young men rushed to assist the police, overpowering Mustaqeem and his cousin. Some ran to the village for reinforcements and rope, and eventually the two men were bound and made to walk into the village.

The police were still not aware of their identities. Once in the village, Mustaqeem told the police who he was, in an attempt to save his cousin. "He's innocent. He's not a dacoit, just a simple farmer. Let him go. You have me, what more do you want?" he said. As word spread, a large crowd gathered to see the legendary Baba Mustaqeem, his hair caked with blood and mud, trussed up so tightly he could barely move or stand straight.

Kalyan Mukherjee and Brij Raj Singh continue the account in their book about Malkhan Singh:

> They [the police] dumped them into a small wooden carriage and Mustaqeem began to shout.

"These cops are bastards, they are going to kill me. They have taken away my money. I don't want them to have it: if there are any poor here please take it for your daughters," he kept saying.

The crowds watched him cry hoarse in the carriage. Once out of the sticky small town, the road stretched to the *thana* – a thin strip of metalled road. Derapur had already got the news and more police were on the way. The *thana* had flashed the news to young Mohan Das Menon, the SP of rural Kanpur.

But on the way the policemen changed their minds; they pocketed the money and then one of them began to eye the gold chain that hung around Mustaqeem's neck. They stopped the carriage close to the Ratwa culvert and brought the duo down. As they dragged them into the fields, Mustaqeem kissed the talisman around his neck and prayed to Allah. Being a Sunni he was religious and scared of God. He had known that the road had shortened all too suddenly, just two weeks from the festival of Urs.

It was the fourth of March 1981.

The police later issued an official version, which said that two men were seen acting suspiciously. When asked to stop they had started running across the fields, opening fire on the policemen who then had to shoot back, killing them both. One had been Mustaqeem, "the dreaded Muslim dacoit leader", while the other remained "unknown".

Both Mustaqeem and Balwan Singh had died within a month of the Behmai massacre and, for Man Singh, it signalled the end of an era. He recalled the early days, when Mustaqeem had been a skilled wrestler whose fame was spreading fast through Kalpi. He wrestled for money and the audience gambled, by and large backing him, because he was their local star, the son of Pir Mohammad.

From professional fights, to street fights and gambling, he had drifted to Kanpur, lured by the mysteries of city life. There he had met Balwan Singh who was already a baghi and they became close

friends. It was just a question of time before Mustaqeem was working alongside Balwan, making more money than he had ever seen in his life. He still lived at home and did part-time jobs for the gang, unknown to his family. Then, in 1979, he was with Balwan when he killed a police constable with whom he had some enmity. Mustaqeem took his friend's side, automatically becoming an accomplice. He decided to abscond rather than risk trial for murder, although he had merely been present and had no hand in the actual killing. He had never trusted the police, most of whom were Hindu, and knew of many from his own community who had been subjected to their bullying chauvinism. Man Singh had met the agile, dark, quick-witted Muslim when Mustaqeem fell in love with his sister, Shitala Devi, who lived in the village of Tirahi, not far from Balwan's home. Now that both of them were dead, he told Phoolan Devi, it was only a question of time before fate caught up with him.

20

End of an Era

PHOOLAN DEVI AND MAN SINGH found themselves alone, constantly on the run, exhausted both mentally and physically with no end in sight. It was a hard time, Phoolan recalls:

"Four months we roamed the jungles, facing many difficulties, often without food. We lived on wild berries and occasionally fruit and vegetables stolen from people's fields. Eventually we decided it was time to form a new gang. The first to join us was Maniram, followed by Kharag. Soon after this, the four of us looted a village. It was 4 p.m. We entered the house of a rich landlord and laid hands on stuff worth three to four lakhs. It seemed to be a lot of money but it soon went on procuring arms and ammunition. A month later, five more men joined us: Munna Singh Chauhan and Jaiveer Singh Chauhan, who had been with us before, Mehdi Hassan, Gopi and Jeevan. There were now nine of us in the gang. We organized minor dacoities and kidnappings and concentrated on building up our stock of weapons and bullets. During this time, Baba Mustaqeem's brother, Muslim, also joined us. He had spent some time with Malkhan Singh's gang after Baba's death, but decided to look for us when Malkhan surrendered to the Madhya Pradesh government in the summer of 1982. He said Baba's death still remained to be avenged."

Muslim, who was in fact Mustaqeem's first cousin, was to take his revenge less than two weeks after Malkhan Singh and his gang surrendered to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh in the town of Bhind. His act triggered yet another political storm in Uttar Pradesh and *Sunday*, the current-affairs magazine that had reported the Behmai massacre at great length, ran another cover

story headed: "V. P. Singh – A CM Surrenders". The bold print under the heading read:

> After having staked his chief ministership on his ability to end the dacoit menace in UP, Mr Vishwanath Pratap Singh ultimately fell victim to his own wager. On 28 June, immediately after the massacre of 17 people in Kanpur and Mainpuri by dacoits, the chief minister handed in his resignation. Shubhabrata Bhattacharya visited Lucknow to report on the events that led Mr V. P. Singh to resign."

Later, in the main article, the reporter says:

The Dastampur carnage is an appalling example of sloppy administration in Uttar Pradesh. The innocent villagers of Dastampur need not have been killed had the UP government kept its eyes and ears open. Dastampur is the village where villagers had helped the police to apprehend the dreaded dacoit, Baba Mustaqeem, on 4 March 1981, within three weeks of the Behmai carnage . . . Mustaqeem's brother, Muslim, who was in Mustaqeem's gang, joined Malkhan Singh's gang soon afterwards and vowed to avenge the death of his brother.

When Malkhan Singh and his gang surrendered at Bhind to the Madhya Pradesh chief minister with much fanfare on 17 June 1982, Muslim was not among them. In fact, the Madhya Pradesh police officers knew only too well that Muslim and some other gang members had come half way out of the ravines with Malkhan Singh, changed their minds and returned to the ravines as Muslim felt that he had yet to avenge his brother's death. Muslim's open proclamation that he was staying out of the surrender drama because he wanted to punish the killers of his brother should have been taken more seriously by the police. But the open warning, given just ten days before the Dastampur carnage, was not heeded.

Police pickets had been posted at Dastampur for a year

after the killing of Mustaqeem. In March this year, owing to some strange administrative logic, the UP government felt that Dastampur no more needed police protection and the police picket was withdrawn. After the open threat by Muslim on 17 June became known, the villagers of Dastampur approached Madan Singh, the station officer of the Derapur police station (under whose jurisdiction Dastampur falls). But the station officer was so complacent that he told the villagers not to cry wolf. '*Kya baar baar aa jaate ho. Daaku kahan hain? Bhag jao nahin tho maar ke patang bana doonga*!' (Why do you come time and again? Where are the dacoits? Go away or you will be beaten and made to fly like kites!) the station officer told the villagers, just a few days before the carnage. The villagers had approached the police for protection on hearing that Muslim was coming to avenge the death of Mustaqeem. The station officer did not care to inform his higher-ups about the villagers' plea. Such was the bitterness between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh police administrations after Malkhan Singh's surrender, that neither did the MP police inform the UP police about the resolve of Muslim's gang nor did the UP police take cognisance of what happened at Bhind on the famous surrender day of Malkhan Singh.

Although, some journalist friends tell me, Muslim denies his involvement in the Dastampur killings, the more widely publicized story goes that on the night of 27 June 1982 he drove into the village in an open Matador van. With him were twenty or so armed men. They were looking for the houses of two men, Shivram Singh Yadav and Gangacharan Yadav, both of whom had been well rewarded for assisting the police with the capture of Mustaqeem. All the occupants, including women and children, of the single-storeyed house owned by Shivram Singh Yadav were gunned down. Many of the bodies had several bullet wounds. Hearing the sound of gunfire, the other family managed to escape, much to Muslim's rage, and he opened fire on their neighbours, killing

another two men and a twelve-year-old boy. When the gang left, the villagers were in no doubt as to the reason for their vendetta. They fired shots into the air and shouted, "*Baba Mustaqeem zindabad! Khoon ka badla khoon se lenge!*" – "Long live Baba Mustaqeem! We will avenge blood with blood!"

On the same night there was another spate of revenge killings in the village of Rampura, Uttar Pradesh, where six harijans were shot dead. They were said to have been suspected police informers.

Vishwanath Pratap Singh, who resigned as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh over the affair the next day, was later to become Prime Minister of the country, following Rajiv Gandhi's defeat at the polls in November 1989. By then, Muslim would have spent seven years in jail, but in 1982 none of this could have been foreseen. When questioned about the dacoit problem in July of that year, Mr V. P. Singh responded in the following way:

Q: Why did you resign?

A: I felt I had a responsibility. There have been a series of such killings. My brother has been a victim of the dacoits. But at the same time, I would not like to blame the police because they have shown good results. A number of notorious gangs have been eliminated.

Q: The height of your regime was the anti-dacoity drive of last winter. There is an allegation that a number of false encounters took place where innocent people were killed. How do you react to this charge?

A: As many as 130 policemen laid down their lives. UP is a very politically alive state. If what is alleged was true, then people would not have taken it lying down. No government could have survived such an eventuality. Of course, certain cases have come to our notice. We have instituted murder charges against four Sub- Inspectors and eleven constables. But the allegations are, in most cases, wild.

Q: What is your reaction to the surrender of Malkhan Singh?

A: We are not in favour of surrenders.

Q: It is well known that while Malkhan was surrendering, Muslim, who was a member of his gang, announced that he was not surrendering because he wanted to avenge the death of his brother, Mustaqeem. Should this not have put the police on alert at Dastampur?

A: Yes, that is one part. The villagers had spoken to the station officer at Derapur. But somehow he did not react or inform his superiors. We have suspended him. So the station officer is suspended and the CM is dismissed!

In March 1982, Mr V. P. Singh's elder brother, Justice Chandra Shekar Prasad, a judge of the Allahabad High Court, was shot dead, together with his twelve-year-old son, Ajit Pratap Singh, and a servant travelling in the same jeep. The second son, Vikram Pratap Singh, then nine years old, was injured. They had been returning from the family palace, an old fort, after a day's *shikaar* (hunt). It is almost certain that the dacoits mistook the judge's jeep for a police jeep and thought they had run into an ambush. The son who survived heard them say, "*Galti ho gai*" ("It's been a mistake").

This incident, coupled with growing public outrage at police excesses in Uttar Pradesh, led many to conclude that just as the dacoits were motivated by feelings of personal revenge, so were politicians.

Before Mr V. P. resigned, in May 1981 the *Times of India* had stated in an editorial:

> The UP police claims that it has arrested 40,000 dacoits in the last five years and liquidated another 3,000 in armed encounters, more than 1,000 of them in the course of last year alone. But the menace, far from diminishing, is acquiring increasingly alarming proportions. Some of the more disreputable gangs that ravage the countryside in the three states are becoming bigger and bolder. And no sooner one group of thugs is accounted for than several others

spring up. On all accounts, the police has been fighting a losing battle so far.

The reasons are not far to seek. Most of the dacoits enjoy the protection of powerful politicians, landlords and, on occasion, even some of the police officers in the ravines. Allegations of such collusion are routinely made by members of all parties against one another in Lucknow, Bhopal and Jaipur [the three administrative centres of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajastan respectively]. Indeed, instances are not lacking where a politician has called in dacoits to liquidate a rival or silence a critic; often enough, their services are also requisitioned to fight caste wars . . .

In January that year the same newspaper – considered to be the country's "establishment paper" – carried an article headed: "Dacoits Links and Intelligence", which began:

> Many eyebrows were raised when Kashi Ram, the first member of Malkhan Singh's gang to be arrested, disclosed his gang's links with politicians to policemen in this region.
>
> Although police officials were tightlipped about the matter, reliable sources said Kashi Ram had confessed his gang's links with two former rulers [a reference to local royal families] one former Minister of the then Lok Dal Government in Uttar Pradesh and several others who were giving protection to the gang.
>
> The only "industry" that exists here and has the maximum job potential is the institutionalized form of dacoity. The dacoits have a better intelligence network than the police. They have the support of the police who are more loyal to them than to their authorities, politicians who are more loyal to them than to their political parties, support of white-collar dacoits who are defined by the Indian Penal Code as "harbourers" . . . In return the harbourers use their links with the dacoits, command

respect in the society and earn a good share of the dacoits' income. . . .

Before he surrendered, Malkhan Singh had decided that he did not trust the police in Uttar Pradesh and would only give himself up in Madhya Pradesh. More than that. He had come to the conclusion that there was only one police officer he could trust, the SP of Bhind, Rajendra Chaturvedi. There had been speculative talk about how Chaturvedi had been transferred to Bhind, on Malkhan's insistence, because he refused to deal with his predecessor and had chosen Bhind as the venue of his surrender. If anything went wrong, if he and his men were double-crossed in any way, the ravines were close by and members of his gang would still have all their weapons. By contrast, the police accompanying them would be unarmed and under strict instructions not to react to the "minor" provocations that were inevitable when hunter and hunted are thrown together. This had been one of Malkhan's demands and Chaturvedi had acquiesced, in the face of much public criticism.

On his way to Bhind, Malkhan and his gang visited Bilao, the village of his birth. They received a tumultuous welcome; old women rushed to embrace him and young men bent to touch his feet. In response, members of his gang fired a volley of bullets into the air, in celebration and defiance of the police, who escorted them with unloaded rifles. As instructed, the police did not react, accepting it all as part of the tamasha, the last gesture of bravado on the eve of his surrender. The news of what went on in Bilao riled sections of the press and many politicians, across the border in Uttar Pradesh. The Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister and Chaturvedi were accused, once again, of "glorifying dacoits". Malkhan left his ancestral village, having distributed large sums of money after spending some time with his relatives, in an atmosphere of jubilant festivity. Many from the village accompanied the gang to Bhind for the official ceremony.

The village got its name from the wild cats that used to inhabit the area. The legend is that many years ago, the Brahmins of Bilao

called upon the Thakurs of Amayan to help them fight the Meos, a warrior clan of Muslims. The Thakurs brought with them a huge dog – almost as large as a donkey, say the villagers – as a symbol of their power. One night the dog was torn apart by the wild cats of the ravines and consequently the village was named Bilao, which means "wild cat" in Bundelkhandi, the local dialect.

The news that Malkhan Singh was tired of running, tired of life in the ravines at the age of thirty-eight, made Man Singh stop and think. He spoke to Phoolan Devi about it but she retorted, "Let him do as he pleases. When have I ever followed him?" Her bitterness was based on the fact that after Mustaqeem's death she had sent him a message, seeking his assistance. She had said they were under great pressure, following the encounter at Galauli, where they had lost five men, including Sobaran, who had been a member of his gang. She had not know at the time that Sobaran had come to kill her. She had asked for survival money, for food and ammunition, but the Bandit King had not responded. Later, Ghanshyam, who was related to Malkhan, warned her in friendship not to approach him again, adding that in baghi circles he spoke of her "badly". Phoolan Devi was in no mood to follow in his footsteps. Besides, she told Man Singh, she didn't trust the police, no matter which side of the border they came from.

In contrast to Malkhan Singh, Phoolan Devi and all those with whom she associated had no "political contacts" to speak of, although there was speculation in the media that she had. Being of a lower caste, with much less money and therefore less power, she could not match Malkhan Singh's ability in buying her way through turbulent times.

21

On the Run

FOLLOWING THE RESIGNATION of V. P. Singh, the UP Chief Minister, in June 1982, there was a growing split within the police force, not only in Uttar Pradesh but aiso in Madhya Pradesh and possibly on a national scale. Police and government tactics in dealing with the law-and-order problem came under public scrutiny, resulting in a spate of newspaper articles and public demonstrations demanding a change. There were those who supported the methods used in securing the surrender of Malkhan Singh; on the other hand many criticized the "soft approach", convinced that it would, in the long term, simply encourage lawlessness. They pointed to the fact that the Bandit Queen was still at large and continued to evade the police, while thousands of innocent people were being victimized in the search for her and the small band of men under her command.

This issue had been highlighted in the press for at least a year preceding V. P. Singh's decision to step down from office. For instance, in September 1981, the *Indian Express* had carried a report headed "Innocents killed in anti-dacoity drive". N. K. Singh, their correspondent in Bhopal, wrote:

> On July 24 and August 11, hundreds of farmers organized a rally at Bhind to protest against the killing of "innocent persons". In a memorandum to the district magistrate, the farmers demanded the immediate arrest of the officer who had shot down Vishwanath.
>
> As Mr Ramashanker Singh and other Opposition members revealed on Tuesday in the Assembly, Vishwanath was

neither a member of any listed or unlisted gang, nor was there any warrant against him, nor was he "wanted" by the police, nor had he a criminal record, yet when he was killed, the police described him as a hardened member of the notorious Pan Singh gang.

. . . the Chief Minister answered the Legislator's questions saying that before making any statement in the House, "the Government would like to satisfy itself with all aspects of the case. I don't want to give piecemeal information," he said.

This led to a heated exchange between the Chief Minister and Mr Ramashanker Singh who alleged that the police had created "a reign of terror in Chambal division by murdering innocent persons in fake encounters".

At one stage, the Chief Minister told the Lok Dal member, "You cannot force me to answer right now."

However, later in the same article:

> The Chief Minister admitted on Monday in the Assembly that a Congress (I) MLA of Shivpuri district had made a complaint that a large number of women were illegally detained in a police camp for 18 days. They were gang-raped and paraded naked in a nearby village. The Chief Minister assured the agitated members that he had ordered an enquiry into the charge and its findings would be tabled in the House.
>
> Another serious charge made against the police is that of harassment of innocent persons under the recently promulgated dacoit-affected areas ordinance. Innocent persons are threatened with arrest under the ordinance to extort money from them. Many complaints of this nature have been received from Chhattarpur district. At Chhattarpur, some arrested persons had also complained that they had lost their "manhood" because of electric shocks given by the police."

The credibility of the Uttar Pradesh police force and civil administration had been eroded and it was in this climate that Rajendra Chaturvedi went to Delhi and asked to see the Prime

Ater Fort, near Bhind. High up in the ravines, locations like this provided dacoit gangs with a good view of the surrounding countryside, giving shelter by day and cover for camp fires at night. (*Horace Ové*)

A village well in Uttar Pradesh. (*Horace Ové*)

Police patrol in the ravines. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

Police questioning a villager. (*Prashant Panjiar*)
Inset: Retired policeman whose nose has been cut by dacoits as a punishment. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

Interior of a ravine village. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

Above and inset: Mallah boatmen on the Chambal river. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

Camels cross the Chambal river on the trade route from Rajastan through Uttar Pradesh to Madhya Pradesh. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

The ravines near the Betwa river. (*Horace Ové*)

Ravine roads. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

Dacoits in the ravines. (*Prashant Panjiar*)

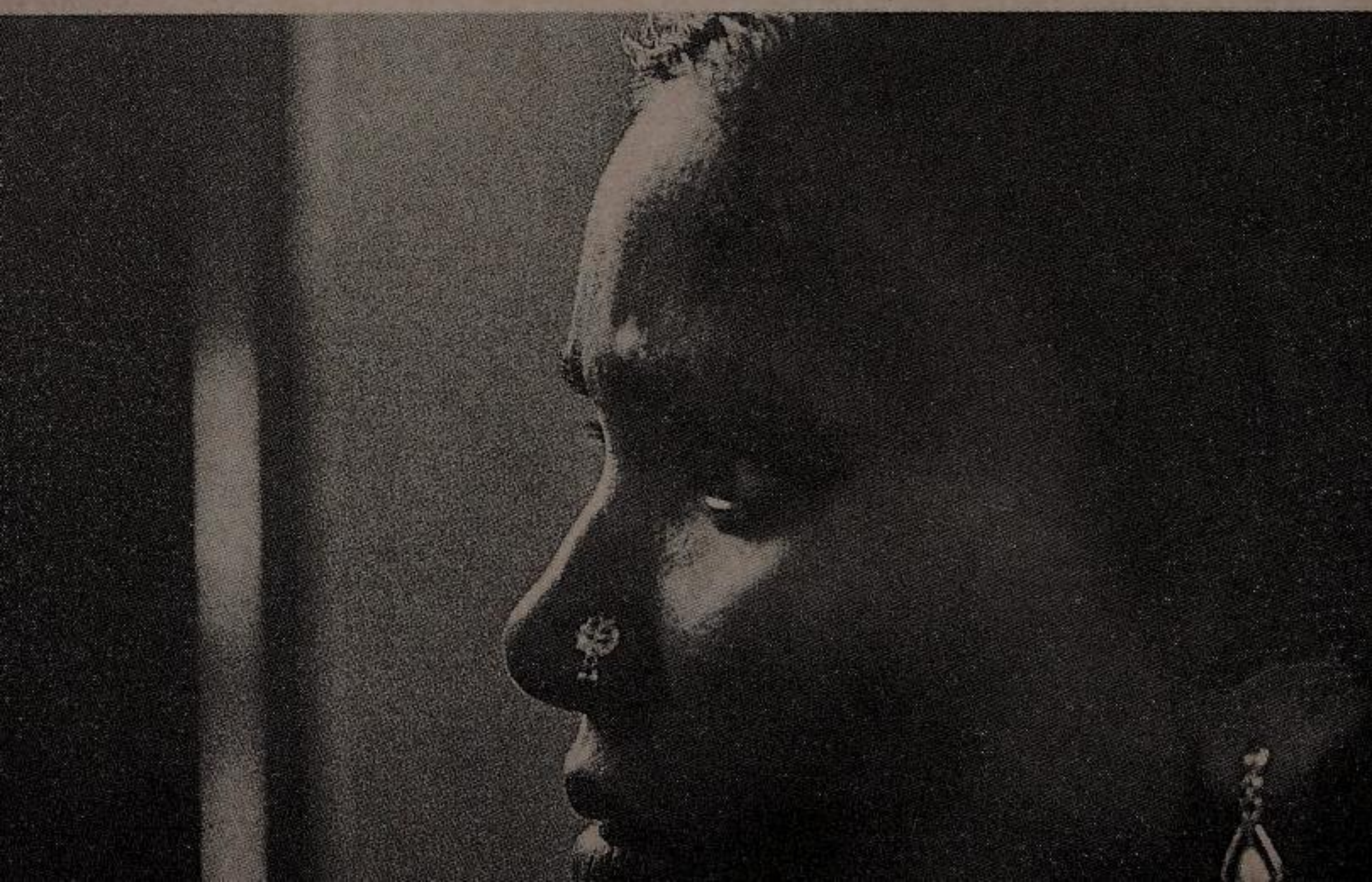
Man Singh and Phoolan Devi,
12 February 1983. (*Sondeep Shankar*)

Phoolan Devi with police escort,
12 February 1983 (*Sondeep Shankar*)

Phoolan Devi at the surrender ceremony in the remote village of Bhind to which more than 7,000 villagers came from the surrounding countryside. (*Sondeep Shankar*)

Phoolan Devi in Gwalior Central Jail, 1983. (*Jagdish Yadav*)

Right and below : Phoolan Devi in Gwalior Central Jail, 1986. (*Prashant Panjiar*)



Minister. He told her that even in Madhya Pradesh the police were losing credibility: too many lives were being lost; the general public was getting increasingly disenchanted with the situation, and Phoolan Devi had become the living symbol of their failure. He said it could take years for them to capture her. There were over two hundred villages in the Chambal Valley alone and reports now indicated that she had the capacity to move freely right across the north of India, travelling as far as the Nepal border. The only way, he told Mrs Gandhi, was somehow to persuade Phoolan Devi to lay down her arms, as Malkhan Singh had done. The Prime Minister, having listened to Chaturvedi carefully, gave him the authority to explore the possibilities and instructed him to keep the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Arjun Singh, apprised of all developments. If Phoolan Devi could be persuaded to surrender, she would be offered the same terms as Malkhan Singh had been offered.

The concept of "voluntary surrender" was not new in the history of banditry. There had been two such occasions, in 1960 and in 1972, of mass surrenders organized by leaders who came to prominence after India's independence in 1947. Both these leaders, Acharya Vinoba Bhave and Jaiprakash Narayan, were considered to be the spiritual heirs to Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and they commanded tremendous respect in the country as a whole.

In 1960, five years after the demise of Mansingh and two years after that of Putli Bai, the most famous bandits of the time, hundreds of dacoits from the Chambal Valley laid down their weapons in response to a call from Vinoba Bhave.

At the time, Mansingh's only surviving son, Tehsildar Singh, was in jail under the threat of a death sentence. He had been in custody since 1956 and had been sentenced to an extraordinary aggregate of 246 years. Expecting the death penalty, he told me when I met him at his ancestral home in the village of Khare Rathore, in 1988, that he had accepted his fate. Meanwhile, the courts commuted his sentence to life imprisonment, much to his dismay. He told me that, at the time, he couldn't stand the thought of tens of years stretching ahead; the humility of being in the hands of erratic jailers;

becoming an old and embittered man, his spirit broken. It was for these reasons, he said, he had petitioned the Supreme Court of India to grant him the death penalty instead. His request was granted but, because of a strange twist of events – bureaucratic bungles and wrangles – years passed and nothing happened.

Finally, during the late 1960s, he decided to write to Vinoba Bhave, reiterating his own willingness to die but drawing attention to various social and economic conditions in the Chambal Valley that had led many young people into "a pointless life of bloodshed and crime". He implored the Gandhian veteran to "intervene", to "do something about their future". Bhave, old and frail, passed the letter on to J. P. Narayan, his political heir, urging him to look into the matter. "I was not thinking of myself," Tehsildar Singh, an old man himself by then, stressed repeatedly, as he told the story, surrounded by his young grandchildren, who climbed on and off his lap at random, engrossed in their new game. All who encountered him while I was there, at his home and travelling through Uttar Pradesh (we took the children to the annual cattle fair at Bateshwar, on the banks of the Jamuna), greeted him with ceremonial respect, touching his feet, calling him Dau, as they had called his father.

When J. P. Narayan received the letter, he looked at the dates involved and came to the conclusion that the death sentence must have been carried out. In order to respond to Bhave's letter, he instructed a member of his staff to investigate the matter with the jail authorities and handed the letter, for the sake of posterity, to the Gandhi Ashram in Pune, not far from Bombay. It reflected the influence of Mahatma Gandhi and, coming from Mansingh's son, was considered to be a document of historical importance.

Much to his surprise, JP (as he was popularly called) was informed that Tehsildar Singh was still awaiting execution on death row. He flew to Delhi and spoke to the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, who encouraged him to meet the prisoner.

As a result of this, Tehsildar was released from prison – parole that ended in a political pardon – and helped JP to persuade another 483 dacoits to lay down their arms in 1972.

Interestingly, the vast majority of these men were Thakurs and Gujars of the Kshatriya caste, incorporating in their midst some Brahmins. Sudras were in a minority and there were just 13 Muslims and one Sikh. All the gang leaders were Thakurs or Gujars.

Minoo Masani, a journalist-turned-politician representing the right wing of Indian politics, spoke of this philosophy of voluntary surrender when he interviewed Jaiprakash Narayan for the *Illustrated Weekly of India* in June 1972, after the mass surrender of these predominantly Thakur gangs of the time. JP responded in the following way to questions about his involvement and opinions on "the problem of dacoits":

> JP: I would like to start by saying that, as with all of us ordinary human beings, the dacoits also have their moments of introspection and repentance. Nobody is one hundred per cent criminal or one hundred per cent saint.
>
> MM: What is the philosophical basis of this experiment?
>
> JP: I would say the philosophical basis is the same as that of *Bhoodan*, *Gramdan* and Ghandhiji's idea of "Trusteeship" – the idea that the human heart can be changed if a proper approach is made, that nobody is irredeemable and that the dacoits of Chambalghati are no exceptions. The philosophy behind it is similar to the philosophy behind modern penology – that the criminal has to be reformed and not punished.
>
> MM: Who do you find, JP, are the more intractable – the dacoits or businessmen?
>
> JP: I think it is businessmen who are more intractable. That is why we have this creeping disease of "Statism" in India today.
>
> MM: Supposing a cynic were to say that this is a law and order problem and you are needlessly giving it more noble dimensions? Are these men really *baghis*, rebels? Are they part Robin Hood?

JP: The rebel or *baghi* tradition behind the Chambalghati dacoits goes back centuries. The defeat of the Rajput classes of the area, such as the *Tomars* and the *Bhadaurias*, at the hands of the Sultans of Delhi – and later the *Moghuls* and *Marathas* – converted them into rebels against the established order and kept the tradition alive. Geophysical and economic conditions helped the process. The Robin Hood tradition has also been alive among them. The latest instance was that of the legendary Mansingh. He would distribute a considerable part of what he took from the rich to the poor. He ran schools in various places and the poor looked upon him as a benefactor and called him "*Raja*". The tradition may no longer exist in the same form, but its memory and habit of mind persist.

Most of them, I should say 75 per cent of those who are surrendering, are persons whose families were victims of some socio-economic injustice on the part of some petty revenue or police officials. Being hot-tempered people, the provocation led them to some violent action after which they took shelter in the bosom of the ravines. Their initial crime having been committed to avenge injustice, they naturally look upon themselves as *baghis*.

This is not, therefore, a mere law and order problem but a socio-economic and psychological problem. Everyone, including official committees of inquiry, accept this. But interestingly enough, for some reason, the law and order aspect of the problem has been given much more attention than any other aspects. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that practically nothing has been done so far to remove the socio-economic causes which breed this problem.

These are extracts from a lengthy interview (indicating the importance of the issue at the time). Towards the end, Minoo Masani asks him:

MM: What are these "sophisticated weapons" that are referred to in the press?

JP: I really do not know much about weapons, but I was told that they include light machine guns, bren and sten guns and automatic rifles. I was told by someone while the surrender ceremony was on, that the value of the arms surrendered would be Rs 10 to Rs 15 *lakhs*.

MM: Any idea as to where they come from?

JP: From the police, from the military. There is a flourishing trade in pilfered arms in the country, you know. I was told that a good deal of arms find their way out into the blackmarket from the arms repair factory in Gwalior.

MM: What is this controversy about keeping the press and public away from the scene of the surrender? What is wrong with the BBC making a film? Is it not good public relations for India abroad where our image is rather dim?

JP: I have much to say in criticism of the Government's policy on this and some other matters. But, at the moment, I must restrain myself. This much, however, I must say, that for the life of me I have not been able to understand the Government's inhibitions in this respect . . . Whenever the police succeed in shooting down a few dacoits, the event is as well publicized as possible; the dead bodies are exhibited to the public, their photographs as well as the photographs of the police who "bagged" them are publicized in the press, and the announced prizes are ostentatiously given away. All that is supposed to produce a salutary effect and strengthen the power and prestige of the law and order authority. But has that authority no other philosophy than that of tooth for tooth and eye for eye? Are we so primitive still in our ideas of crime and punishment? I do not know what others think, but I have no doubt that the surrender programme could never have succeeded without the full and willing cooperation of the Madhya Pradesh Police, as well as the Police of Uttar Pradesh and Rajastan. I have publicly acknowledged their help and said that a good measure of the credit for the surrender goes, without doubt, especially

> to the Madhya Pradesh Police. Therefore, it is wrong to think the surrenders have lowered the prestige of the police in that area and eroded the authority of the law and order establishment. I strongly repudiate all these assumptions. They will be valid only if the authorities believe that shooting and killing are the only methods that the police can follow in dealing with the dacoits.

Encouraged by Mrs Gandhi's attitude, Rajendra Chaturvedi now faced the task of finding Phoolan Devi in order to offer her the option of a voluntary surrender. He spoke to Malkhan Singh, in jail, who had no idea where she might be but said he could probably get in touch with Ghanshyam who had been associated with her, through Vikram Mallah and Mustaqeem. It was an important lead and within some weeks Chaturvedi was able to meet Ghanshyam, having assured him through Malkhan and their "contact" that he would be coming alone and unarmed. They spoke at length and parted on the understanding that Ghanshyam would, on the one hand, consider the option himself and, on the other, try to make contact with Phoolan Devi in order to arrange a meeting which they would all attend.

Shortly after this Ghanshyam met the gang in the jungles of Hamirpur, where he informed her that he had met the policeman; had decided to trust him; was considering surrender himself, urging Phoolan and Man Singh to at least explore the possibility. After some discussion, it was agreed that they would meet Chaturvedi together in the ravines. Ghanshyam would make all the arrangements regarding security and send them word through a trusted member of his gang.

The day Mansharam and Ramprakash, two members of Ghanshyam's gang, arrived at their camp, a few miles from the village of Sahnson in the district of Etawah, Phoolan Devi was in a restless mood, as she awaited their arrival The night before she had dreamt images of blood, she said, but could not work out their meaning. She had felt no anxiety in her dream, so whose blood was it? Man Singh tried to reassure her, saying they did not have to give the

policeman an answer and would merely listen to what he had to say.

When Ghanshyam's men arrived, they were given tea and something to eat. They had brought a letter from Ghanshyam that said time was running out; if they were serious about considering the offer, they should come to his camp immediately. The letter bore Ghanshyam's seal, which he always wore like a talisman round his neck, so its authenticity was not in doubt. Man Singh and Phoolan Devi agreed to accompany the men, leaving the rest of the gang where they were, with instructions to move to another site, further east, in case of trouble.

They did not know that Ghanshyam had been meeting police officers on the other side of the border in Uttar Pradesh, in addition to Chaturvedi, who was from the Madhya Pradesh force. Clearly, he wanted to ensure that he extracted the best possible deal. Malkhan's surrender had proved to be a political success, with Madhya Pradesh taking all the credit. By contrast, the reputation of the Uttar Pradesh police force was in shreds and the resignation of the Chief Minister V. P. Singh had not helped. The UP authorities were keen to prove that they too could win the confidence of dacoit gangs if they so chose.

Earlier that year the UP police had negotiated a similar deal with another prominent gang leader called Chhabiram. Reliable sources have it that when Chhabiram emerged from the cover of shrub, having thrown down his rifle, he was shot dead in cold blood because in the end the UP police did not believe in "doing deals" with dacoits. The best explanation they could offer, when questioned later, was that they thought he had "acted odd" and so they had been forced to take "precautions". News of Chhabiram's killing spread like wildfire through the ravines, enforcing suspicions against the UP police.

It was in this spirit of competition that they were negotiating with Ghanshyam, who remained distrustful of them and therefore had not mentioned it to Phoolan Devi and Man Singh. However, unlike Chaturvedi, who understood the culture and tradition of baghis, the officers of Uttar Pradesh showed little sensibility.

There had been much bitterness against him, Chaturvedi told me many years later, from senior police officers and other officials in Uttar Pradesh after Malkhan Singh's surrender. In terms of press coverage, the Madhya Pradesh administration and police had stolen the limelight and pulled off a political coup which Chaturvedi said his colleagues across the border resented. Some politicians went so far as to say that dacoit leaders had expressed public confidence in him only because they "had him in their pockets", he added wryly. He emphasized the fact that he had done nothing without consulting his superiors, including the Prime Minister; but both politicians and police officers with an axe to grind had cast aspersions on his integrity and motives. He told me he accepted it all philosophically because he "understood politics"! "Rivalry and competition are common emotions," he said, as one of his staff arrived to invite us into the Mess for lunch: a very welcome meal of rice, dal, vegetables and hot chapatis.

Unbeknown to Chaturvedi, Ghanshyam had met with a representative of the Additional Inspector-General of Police, Mr R. Govil. For his part, Govil was having the gang leader watched and followed by a sophisticated network of scouts and informers, in the hope that he would eventually lead them to Phoolan Devi. When Ghanshyam despatched Mansharam and Ramprakash, two senior members of his gang, none of them were aware of their vulnerability. Neither were Man Singh and Phoolan Devi, as they trekked in silence through the ravines, following their guides.

A short distance away, on the outskirts of the next village, a PAC patrol sat in wait, confident that Ghanshyam's messengers would choose the same route on their return journey and, with some luck, would not be alone.

All Phoolan Devi remembers is the heat of the day and the exhaustion she was feeling at the time. Her clothing soaked with sweat, she kept walking, thinking that she would have to stop soon to take a break. She would wait until the next patch of shade; but trees in the ravines are few and far between. Suddenly she heard a burst of gunfire. Man Singh, who had been just behind her, fell or threw himself on top of her. He was not injured, she could tell from

the brisk urgency with which he spoke as he dragged her towards the thorny shrubs of babul lining the pathway. The two men ahead had been hit. One tried to drag himself towards cover, trailing blood in the dust, but his body shuddered as several more bullets struck him, before he went limp.

Fortunately for Phoolan Devi and Man Singh, a junior constable had reacted too soon and taken a shot while they were still out of range. This enabled them to move sideways and, once in the shrub, they were out of view. The officer in charge told his men to hold their fire. It was just the pause they needed to zigzag to safety. From a distance they heard a loudhailer, telling them to drop their weapons and surrender. They were being assured they would not be harmed. Phoolan Devi says she fired three shots into the air as they continued to run.

She was furious. They had been double-crossed by Chaturvedi. Who else would have known about this meeting? She made up her mind and told Man Singh that all policemen were dogs – dirty filthy dogs. Any thought of surrender was out of the question, as far as she was concerned. In the circumstances, Man Singh had no arguments.

Ghanshyam, too, cursed Chaturvedi when he heard of the ambush at Chaurela and fired a volley of bullets into the sand out of anger. He moved camps in quick succession and sent another message to Phoolan Devi, saying that he had decided not to give himself up. He did not trust the police on either side of the border. They were all the same.

For Rajendra Chaturvedi, who later read a police report on the incident, it was a major setback. He had assured the Chief Minister, Arjun Singh, who was in touch with Mrs Gandhi in Delhi, that he would soon have results and now he found he was back where he had begun. The informer, who had provided the link with Ghanshyam, had disappeared overnight and the policeman was reluctant to send for his family, as he would normally have done to question them. It would be seen as "police pressure" and misinterpreted. Ghanshyam and Phoolan Devi would attribute the ambush to him. He decided instead to visit Ghanshyam's uncle and Phoolan

Devi's mother in order to explain that he had had nothing whatsoever to do with the killings.

After much effort, patience and anxiety, after sending out many feelers to Ghanshyam, Chaturvedi was informed one day that the bandit leader had agreed to meet him once again, in the ravines east of Bhind. He set out unarmed, his only escort one of Ghanshyam's harbourers. At the camp he was surrounded by the entire gang, armed, alert and tense. Ghanshyam had believed him but remained withdrawn and cautious.

"What about Phoolan Devi?" he asked.

"What about her?" Ghanshyam retorted.

"Will she surrender if you do?"

He got a shrug.

"If you have any way of contacting her – or Muslim – please tell them I had nothing to do with what happened at Chaurela. I found out later. I want to help and if you trust me you will be safe. If all of you move to Madhya Pradesh, I will instruct our police not to look for you; to leave you alone. Also, tell Phoolan Devi I have met her mother, to reassure her that if she surrenders in Madhya Pradesh, I will see to it that the whole family is protected."

"You've been to UP?" Ghanshyam was surprised.

"Yes," he said. "Tell her to check if she wants."

They both laughed and the atmosphere lightened.

"I'll see what I can do," Ghanshyam said finally. "I'll try."

That was the only "assurance" he had got, Chaturvedi told me when we met in Rewa, many years later, on the lawns of the Police Mess. I was there with other members of the film crew with whom I was working at the time. I had telephoned him from Gwalior and fixed an appointment to meet him. He had only recently been posted to Rewa, as Commander of the Special Armed Force and his house was still being done up. Since his wife had not yet joined him, he was staying at the Police Mess and from the attitude of the staff, he was obviously an extremely popular officer. After drinking cold beer on the lawn, we were treated to a wonderful lunch, and everyone was full of stories.

"Continuing the saga," he said after lunch, "time passed and

winter descended on the ravines. It was bitterly cold. Icy nights, shrouded in mist, cut visibility down to a few feet. It was on such a night that I got the message I had been waiting for."

He was in his office late one evening. A villager in dusty clothes and mud-caked shoes asked to see him. The sentries kept the man at the gate and sent him word. Chaturvedi, used to such visits, thought nothing of it as he instructed his peon to lead the man in. Many such people used to come, and still came, to see him because of his position of power, he said; and undoubtedly also because by then he had gained the reputation of being an "understanding" policeman and a compassionate man. They came to him for jobs, for jobs for their sons and sons-in-law, for "justice", for compensation connected with road accidents, and to lodge various complaints. He was tired that day, engrossed in his own thoughts, when an old man was ushered into his office. He was a humble sort of man, his hands joined together in a namaste, as if he were praying.

"What is it?" Chaturvedi asked.

"Parusram Singh sent me, Sahib. He says if you want to meet Phoolan Devi you must come with me."

"Where is she?"

"I don't know, Sahib. I have come to take you to Parusram Singh."

"Now?"

"Yes. He says it will only be possible if you come now. He also says you must come alone and you must not wear a police uniform."

Parusram was a Thakur farmer who lived in a small, remote ravine village in Madhya Pradesh, close to the Uttar Pradesh border, and was known to have contact with baghi gangs in the area. Chaturvedi offered the old man some tea, telephoned his home to say he had urgent business out of town and went into the adjoining room to change his clothes. He put a small camera and tape recorder into his pocket, adding his revolver, after a moment's thought.

As he stepped back into the main office, the old man said, "Sahib, it is very cold, you should take a blanket. We will have to

walk." Ignoring his advice, Chaturvedi said he would take his motorcycle. "We will still have to walk," insisted the old man as they left.

A thick fog descended and the going was slow, as trucks and cars rushed past them on the highway. The old man directed him and when they reached a village, not far from the main road, it was already past midnight. The old man asked him to park his motorcycle outside a darkened hut: it would be safe there; now they would continue on foot. He disappeared into the hut and emerged with a blanket which he offered the policeman, repeating his earlier statement: "It is cold, Sahib."

Chaturvedi said he had been touched by the old man's concern and grateful for the blanket. The air had felt ice-cold as he rode the motorcycle and he was shivering. He wrapped the coarse and heavy blanket round himself, covering the lower half of his face for warmth.

Polite as he was, the old man made no pretence about the fact that he was under strict instructions to take every possible precaution. Suddenly, in the middle of nowhere he sat down on a cement culvert that bridged an irrigation canal. The cement was cold and Chaturvedi spent the time pacing up and down in an effort to keep the numbness away. "Why have we stopped?" he asked.

"In case we are being followed," the old man replied in a matter-of-fact way, as he smoked bidis.

They stayed at that spot for two hours or more and Chaturvedi began to feel impatient and irritated, as his limbs stiffened. The old man sat motionless on the culvert, oblivious to the cold, or so it seemed. He too was wrapped in a blanket.

Then they were walking again. The fog had begun to lift and the lights of a village were in sight.

Phoolan Devi's diary records the events of the morning that followed.

"At 6 a.m. our look-out warned us that the village headman was coming towards us, accompanied by two men in brown coats. I decided to let them come. I wanted to know who they were. The sentries passed word down the line and I got a message saying that

one of them was Parusram Singh, the other probably some relative of his who looked like a "military man" and the third a villager.

"Parusram Singh was a Thakur, but he was on friendly terms with many people. In the days when we had no money and had gone hungry, he had often brought us food. He would even cook for us himself and treated everyone with respect. I told the sentries to allow them in, including the stranger. When they arrived, I introduced them to members of the gang, but, as I shook hands with the other man, a suspicion crossed my mind that he was a police officer. As if reading my mind, he said he was a relative of Parusram and had always wanted to meet me. He apologized for the intrusion and said he had forced Parusram to bring him, asking me not to be angry.

"I asked my men to make two more beds for us to sit on and give us good food to eat, since we had honoured guests. I sat next to the man, still suspicious and wondering how to ask him who he really was and why he had come to see me. During the conversation, I slipped my hand into his pocket and came up with a camera and a tape recorder. When Parusram saw these things in my hand, he seemed afraid and tried to snatch the tape recorder from me, saying it was an expensive gadget. In the confusion the tape recorder got switched backwards and forwards and I heard my own voice. I was very excited and fascinated by this machine and asked what other wonders he had. Out came a pistol from his pocket!

"I asked him to tell me who he really was and said I would not harm him because he had come as a guest with a trusted friend. It was then that he said he was the S P of Bhind, Rajendra Chaturvedi, and that he had been sent by the Chief Minister, Arjun Singh, to discuss the terms of my surrender. He had recorded our conversation for the Chief Minister.

"I was amused and said he had hardly talked to me and would not have much to tell the Chief Minister. He then said he had planned to visit us continuously for three or four days before broaching the subject. He wanted me to be in the right frame of mind. I began to relax and told the men to keep a strict watch while I talked to the Superintendent of Police.

"I told him that I could not surrender while my family remained in Uttar Pradesh. They would be harassed by Maiyadin and the police who had been after me for a long time. He was very patient and listened to me, giving his own arguments. He wanted to discuss the terms of my eventual surrender, he said, and did not intend to impose anything on me. It was then that I said my entire family would have to be rehabilitated in Madhya Pradesh, with land and a house provided for them by the government. If I surrendered, my relatives would have no protection, I explained, from either the police or enemies of mine in the village.

"The SP agreed to carry these demands to the Chief Minister. He asked us to stay in the same area, saying he had given orders to his men; that they would not trouble us till he came back with an answer. He also said that the surrender should take place somewhere nearby.

"It was twelve noon, so we all sat down to eat together. As he was leaving, the SP asked if he could take a photograph of me. I refused. He left with Parusram and the other man around 4 p.m., saying they would be back within eight days, after discussions with the Chief Minister. As soon as they left, we decided to run from there and after a whole day and night of travelling we arrived at a temple. The sadhu of the temple was my guru and I told him what had happened in the past few days. He advised me to surrender, saying we should not let this opportunity slip. They might not ask us again. I did not agree with him at the time and we moved on.

"We arrived in the jungles of Naharpura in the Etawah district. On our third day there, we received news that the SP of Etawah, Ratoori, also wanted to meet us. He arrived soon afterwards with the men who supplied us with food. He said he had heard I was planning to surrender to the Madhya Pradesh police and he spent the whole day trying to persuade me not to. At the end of it all, I agreed with him that since we belonged to UP, the surrender should be there and not in Madhya Pradesh. I was so convincing that when he left he was sure I would agree to his proposals and gave me 5000 rupees, saying we should not leave his jurisdiction. I assured him that we would not and asked him to come back the next morning.

"As soon as he left, Man Singh and I decided to move out of the area. We had both got the feeling that he was not to be trusted. Just before this time, another dacoit, Chabbiram, had agreed to surrender to the UP police but they had gunned him down as he emerged from the jungle unarmed, with other members of his gang.

"We returned to the Bhind district and decided to rest in Parusram's fields, near a tube well. Parusram was very happy to see us and said the SP of Bhind, Chaturvedi, had been there three times looking for us, wondering where we had disappeared to. I told him that we had gone to Etawah on a visit but were now back for good."

22

Negotiations

THE NEXT TIME Rajendra Chaturvedi visited Phoolan Devi's camp, he was given a warm reception. Jaiveer touched his feet, without frisking him, and chatted casually as he led the way to where the rest of the gang were waiting. As the policeman came into view, Man Singh rose from the fire he was building and went to greet him. Touching his feet and giving him a namaste, he took out a 100-rupee note from his pocket and offered it to him.

"It's not necessary," Chaturvedi said, returning his greeting.

"It is our custom," Man Singh insisted. Chaturvedi accepted the gift ceremoniously, imitating the manner in which it had been offered.

Phoolan Devi was in a light-hearted mood. Following Man Singh's example, she bent down to touch his feet, saying, "It's good to see you but I have no money to give!"

Everyone laughed as Chaturvedi repeated, "It's really not necessary."

The atmosphere in the camp was relaxed. All the gang's supplies were stacked under a plastic sheet, hung over branches cut from the surrounding babul trees, and dal boiled on a smoking, makeshift choola. Tea was brought and he was offered a blanket as protection from the wind, as Man Singh struggled to light the fire. When he finally got it going, they sat down on rugs around it, grateful for the warmth. It was an exceptionally cold winter that year, 1982, and it was well over twelve months since he had last met the gang.

Chaturvedi recalls watching Phoolan crouched over the choola, while he talked to the men, making rotis for them all. It occurred to him how very "ordinary" she looked. "Just like any

other village woman in the area, except with her hair cut short and wearing blue bell-bottom trousers," he told us in Rewa, that day on the lawn.

They ate – bajra ki roti, dal and aalu-methi – a simple meal which felt like a feast in their rugged surroundings. The conversation revolved round explanations. Chaturvedi told her he had met Ghanshyam, who now believed him when he said he had had absolutely nothing to do with the death of two members of his gang. They discussed Chabbiram and here, too, Chaturvedi reminded them that the Madhya Pradesh police had not been responsible for that act of betrayal. He said all he could to win their confidence and felt elated by the knowledge that he was succeeding. They decided to trust him. Phoolan raised the issue of her family once again and Chaturvedi said he would visit her mother and work out the arrangements with the Chief Minister, as soon as he had her answer. Phoolan said she needed time to think it over and discuss the matter with Man Singh in private. Chaturvedi had to accept the fact that progress would be slower than he had hoped.

Several such meetings were to follow over the next few days and Chaturvedi said it was then that he got an insight into Phoolan Devi's unpredictable nature, especially at times when she felt under pressure. On one occasion, when he had tried to push her to make up her mind, she had screamed back at him, "Who the fuck do you think you are? Don't forget you are talking to Phoolan Devi! I could have you shot dead this instant and send your body back to your Chief Minister on a donkey!" During all such outbursts, Man Singh tried to bring some calm to the situation and Chaturvedi began to realize certain qualities of strength and steadiness in the man. Chaturvedi began to study him more closely. His long, tangled hair gave him a wild look and his eyes, almost jet-black, were intense and capable of conveying meaning at a glance. Phoolan, by contrast, was erratic and emotional, her eyes quick and alert, always on the move, always restless. "Like a wild animal," Chaturvedi said, "always on her guard, rarely relaxed." He had little option but to remain patient. Having come so far, it would be foolish to allow tempers to get in the way of some negotiated settlement.

He informed her that Ghanshyam had agreed to surrender and wanted to co-ordinate dates with her.

"What about Muslim?" she asked.

Chaturvedi was surprised she had not heard. Muslim had been shot and wounded in an encounter with the Uttar Pradesh police some months earlier. He had managed to escape and contact Chaturvedi, who had driven in a police jeep, picked him up and then driven him to a police hospital in Bhind. His injuries had been fairly serious so Chaturvedi had moved him to a civilian hospital in Gwalior, where he had been treated. He was now in jail, with Malkhan's gang, having achieved the same terms of surrender.

In her diary, Phoolan Devi says: "By now I had full faith in the Madhya Pradesh government and we didn't move camp. On the fourth day, the SP came back at midnight. He told me he was going to fetch my family from Uttar Pradesh. He asked me to give him some token by which my family would believe him. I gave him directions to my house and took off my ring. I told him they would believe I had sent him when they saw the ring.

"I suggested it might be easier if I accompanied him, since I was a master of disguise and had ventured into towns several times, in different clothes. Nobody would recognize me as Phoolan Devi in a sari. I had been to fairs and bazaars dressed like that, I told him. In fact, several times I had even been to city hospitals for treatment, without being discovered. [For several years, Phoolan had suffered from gynaecological problems that caused much bleeding and pain.]

"Then I told him a tale I like to repeat. I had gone to Satna district to the temple of Mahiar Mata, to make an offering of a gold necklace weighing nine tolas. [She told me later it was to pray for "the blessing of a child".] It had my name engraved on it," she said. "Baba Mustaqeem accompanied me, taking me there on a stolen motorcycle. To taunt the police, I informed them that I was coming on the ninth day of the month, a day that was considered auspicious at that temple. I knew thousands of people would be there but when we arrived, the police had surrounded it and were searching every man and woman who entered. They even searched

the women's hair. At first Baba said we should not risk it but I told him all we had to do was to join the pilgrims and remain calm. In any case, no one would recognize us. I went to a *mali*, a flowerseller, and bought a heavy garland of flowers, which I asked him to put in a basket. We placed the jewel box in it too. Leaving the motorcycle near his stall, we said we would be back soon. I was wearing salwar-kameez [tunic and trousers] and had fixed on a false plait. Baba wore trousers and a bush shirt.

"As we entered the temple we were searched. While standing in the queue, I asked a police constable what was going on and why there were so many police about. He told me Phoolan Devi had threatened to raid the temple that day! Both Baba and I were thoroughly amused. The main shrine was on top of a hill and we had to climb many stairs. I hid the gold chain under the garland and placed it round the statue. We watched the motorcycle from a distance and saw that no one was taking any notice of it, so we picked it up and left without any trouble. When we reached a particular spot, close to the jungle, we abandoned it and rejoined the gang, who were waiting for us. Everyone celebrated.

"We always carried a transistor radio with us to keep ourselves informed of news and the whereabouts of the police. That evening, when we switched on the local news, we heard that Phoolan Devi had slipped through the police net and left a nine-tola gold necklace for the goddess!

"Chaturvedi Sahib laughed and said I was a brave girl but should trust him to bring my family. He did not think it would be wise for me to accompany him. I told him I had full faith in him and knew he would do his best. He was back in three or four days, saying that he had had great difficulty in bringing my family to Madhya Pradesh but had finally managed. He said they were at his residence in Bhind. He said he had even managed to get our cow and goat across. I could scarcely believe him, till I saw the cow which he had brought with him as proof! It was the same cow Puttilal had given my family in exchange for me.

"I asked him to take me to meet them but he said he would bring them to me instead. Chaturvedi Sahib really considered my

interests and was genuinely concerned about my safety. That evening, he brought my mother, brother and sister Munni to see me. My mother was very angry and upset, saying that I had uprooted her from her home and village. I pleaded with her, telling her to understand that the UP police would make survival difficult for them; they would beat up the family and put them in jail if I surrendered. She was hard to convince, so eventually I told her to listen to everything the SP Sahib said and not to cause him any trouble. I said I would not allow them to return to UP again."

In a similar effort to evacuate Man Singh's family from Uttar Pradesh, the Madhya Pradesh police found themselves in an embarrassing situation. Outraged by the fact that Phoolan Devi's family had "escaped" in the dead of night assisted by the SP of Bhind, the UP police mounted a guard on Man Singh's village. When the Madhya Pradesh police arrived, they found themselves "surrounded" by their trigger-happy colleagues from across the border. In a panic they drove off through the UP police cordons; shots were fired by both sides and the country read reports of the police firing at each other in their bid to "control" the developments of this saga.

Mr Ammar Razvi, Minister for Parliamentary Affairs, said that "the fullest enquiry would be conducted". When a politician in the Lok Sabha [the lower house of parliament], infuriated by such vague assurances, launched into an attack against him, declaring, "Dacoits have no confidence in the UP police!" he replied:

"I am delighted to receive such news. But I tell you that if criminals have faith in the police force of another state, it is a sad reflection on the integrity of that force."

Meanwhile, Phoolan Devi says: "I then decided on the date of my surrender, 10 February, and put forward my demands. I called Jaiveer Singh Chauhan, who had studied up to the 12th Class in school, and asked him to write down everything I said.

"My first demand was that we should not be given the death penalty; the second was that all charges against us should be tried in the Madhya Pradesh courts, even the cases involving crimes committed in Uttar Pradesh. From what I can remember, (3) was

that my family should be resettled in Madhya Pradesh; (4) my brother and brother-in-law (Rukhmini's husband, Rampal) should be employed in the police force; (5) that my family should be given land and a house in Madhya Pradesh; (6) we should all be released from prison after eight years – like the gangs who surrendered in 1972 had been; (7) all the members of our gang, including me and Man Singh, should be resettled in Madhya Pradesh after we were released from jail; (8) we should also be provided with housing and land to cultivate; (9) the children of all gang members should be given free education; (10) on release, we should all be given licences for the possession of arms for self-protection; (11) we should not be forced to divulge sources of supply for arms and ammunition; (12) we should not be asked to name people who had helped us in any way, fed us, found doctors, etc.; (13) the police should not hold us on remand; (14) we should not be handcuffed; (15) we should be given two good meals a day in jail and allowed a certain amount of freedom.

"In short, I asked for the same facilities given to the dacoits who surrendered in 1972.

"Some days passed before we saw him again. I asked the SP what Arjun Singh had said. He laughed and told us that the Chief Minister was very happy with the turn of events and had gone to Delhi to discuss the matter with the Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. He said that all my terms would be agreed to and, putting his arm around my shoulder he said, "Phoolan, we will make a human being out of you!" I asked, "Will you also convert the UP police and make human beings out of them too?" We all laughed and I put forward two more demands: that all members of our gang, including myself, would be allowed to live together in jail; and that the police should be unarmed at the time of my surrender.

"When Ghanshyam got the news, he decided to surrender with me. Rajendra Chaturvedi housed us in a large bungalow with a heavy police guard round it. The place was illuminated so well that, with all those lights, I felt I was attending my own wedding and forgot the fact that I had just come out of the jungle and was considered by many to be a hardened criminal. I felt a surge of

happiness and found it difficult to be coherent in my speech. Hundreds of journalists and photographers from all over the world were there, but in my state of confusion I was very inconsistent with my answers to their questions."

23

Surrender

THOUSANDS OF VILLAGERS had walked many miles to witness the event. Phoolan Devi was a national legend. Songs had been written about her exploits, although she did not know that at the time. Clay statues of her, dressed in a police uniform carrying a gun, sold in the markets of Kanpur at sixteen rupees a piece, next to statues of "gods, goddesses and other national leaders of the year", as one report put it. Women had begun praying to her, whispering in confidence that she was the reincarnation of Kali, warrior goddess worshipped throughout the Chambal Valley.

Soon after 9 a.m., Phoolan Devi, "Bandit Queen" of the country, "Rebel of the Ravines", the woman villagers knew as Dasyu Sundari, mounted the 23-foot-high wooden platform which had been constructed for the occasion. She had wrapped her red shawl over the new khaki uniform and round her head was the red bandanna she had worn in the ravines to absorb the sweat from her brow. Man Singh and the rest of the gang, seven men in all, followed her up the steps. Portraits of Mahatma Gandhi and the goddess Durga, benevolent avtar of Kali, adorned the centre of the stage as she had specified. The three garlands she had asked for had also been provided and hung on a chair: one for each portrait and one for the Chief Minister. With her rifle still slung over her shoulder, the gunbelt across her chest, Phoolan Devi garlanded the portraits. Then, turning, she placed the third garland round the neck of Arjun Singh, bending down to touch his feet lightly with her forehead. It was a theatrical act of humility. It was also a sign that a deal had been struck. Turning to the thronging crowd, she raised her rifle above her head before placing it, together with the gunbelt,

before the two portraits. In spirit, she was surrendering to the goddess Durga and to Mahatma Gandhi, with villagers and pressmen as her witnesses. Some cheered, some heckled and there was much confusion. A report published soon afterwards by the *Times of India* said:

> The excitement of the show was stolen by a youthful intruder, later identified as a functionary of the Madhya Pradesh Yuva Lokdal. Shortly after the ceremony started, he stepped onto the dais unnoticed and grabbed the mike to address the gathering. Before one realized what was happening he was delivering a fiery speech in which he deplored the government for "Lionizing thugs". The chap did not have a chance to complete his speech. He was pulled out of the dais by a couple of security men and clobbered by others who could lay their hands on him, as he was being whisked away from the scene.
>
> A news photographer, Mr Promod Pushkarna, who sought to capture a piece of the action, was roughed up. He alleged that some policemen dragged and pushed him around. A senior police officer who had rushed to the scene promptly apologized. A district official who had rushed to the rescue of the photographer also had it from the cops, who probably wanted to make a thorough job of it. Even before the incident, some policemen and the security staff were heard mumbling about the chaotic disorder displayed by the pack of media men who apparently had the run of the place.

Another report in the *Hindustan Times* read:

> Rumpus prevailed in the audience of nearly 7,000 for some time as some boys from the local students union threw broken bangles towards the dais as a mark of protest against the incompetence of the law and order authorities in arresting outlaws instead of negotiating for a surrender.

Village women and school children cheered.

Phoolan Devi, in a cold sweat from the fever, found herself being led away hastily to a waiting police van, which was promptly surrounded by journalists and photographers. They bombarded her with questions.

"Were you really leader of your own gang?"

"Does a woman not rule this country?" she snapped back.

"What do you feel about your husband, Puttilal?"

"I should have tracked that bastard down and shot him."

"How did you meet Chaturvedi, the SP of Bhind?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"How much money did you make as a dacoit?"

"How is that your concern?"

"Who were your harbourers?"

Reply: "Your father!"

Man Singh gripped her hand and told her not to respond. It was pointless, he said. He knew she felt trapped by the van, built like a cage with iron bars across each window, and all the commotion around them, aggravated by her own fever, made her almost hysterical. Cameras clicked as she screamed abuse at the photographers, clutching the bars. "You sell my pictures and make money. My mother tells me you make a lot of money. How much do *you* make, you arsehole?"

The press turned against her. For two years preceding her surrender, journalists from everywhere had been in search of her, zeroing in on every little detail they could lay their hands on, digging up facts and making up fiction. Her life and all the gossip that surrounded it became public property. Yet not one reporter had seen or met her until the time of her surrender. Having met her face to face, they didn't like her. She hadn't lived up to their expectations. "The Avenging Angel", "Bandit Queen", "Avtar of Kali", became "A Jangle of Bangles", "Mistress of Murder", "Bandit Brat", and a "Neurotic Nymphomaniac". There was an article I read somewhere which said she was "too dark, too short, flat-chested and rude".

Much of what was printed about Phoolan Devi at the time reflected the nature and prejudice of the men who wrote the articles. For some strange reason, few women covered the story and those

who did had been influenced by their male colleagues, or at any rate had decided to stick with the mainstream of journalistic opinion. Some bizarre pieces appeared in various national newspapers. For instance, a Mr G. V. Krishnan wrote for the *Times of India*:

> Phoolandevi, draped in a red shawl looked like a tent pole with the canvas collapsed around it. She had a red band tied around her head in the Red Indian fashion. The head band attracted one's attention to her face that would otherwise not merit a second glance. The dark and short-statured "Bandit Queen" could easily be missed in a fish-market crowd.

Another man offended by the "short and dark" women of this world! There was another piece by him a few days later, on 22 February 1983, which began:

> Phoolan Devi (at least by now he was writing her name correctly) is no big deal. Blowing the chaff off the "bandit queen" image she emerges as a plain woman with a touch of the wild about her. Remember the wolf boy of Lucknow? He had acquired the habits and lifestyle of the wolves that had brought him up from infancy.
>
> Phoolan Devi appeared no less the product of her environment. She has spent four impressionable years of her life in the Chambal ravines. In a sense, she could be considered the "wolf boy" of Chambal.

"How was life in the ravines?" he had asked her and then wrote:

> She looked bored when the question was raised by this correspondent, who met her in Gwalior Central Jail on Friday. She had just completed an interview with another correspondent. A day earlier a couple of magazine reporters had met her, and scores of applications for interviews with her are reported to be pending with the district authorities.
>
> In the ravines no paperwallahs met me, she said, baffled by such media attention since her surrender in Bhind. Newspapermen who met her on the eve of her surrender and

shortly after it hardly had a good word for her. She is reported to have told them where they got off in unprintable language."

Referring to the terms of her surrender, he asked what facilities she had been offered and then wrote:

"Those given to the dacoits who surrendered in 1972." She could not spell out what they were. "But they were listed on the paper I gave to the police." She called it an "agreement". Did she get anything in writing in response from the police or anyone? "No." How then did it become an agreement?" She would not know. Later in reply to a question, Phoolan Devi said she had wanted the "agreement" to be signed by Mr Rajiv Gandhi.

"Why him?"

"Because he is a *neta* [leader]." The other leader she knew of was Mrs Gandhi. Did she know who the President was? "No idea." Another name she mentioned was of Mr Arjun Singh.

The conversation dried up for a while. Her dialect (Bundelkhandi) sounded double-dutch to this correspondent, who spoke through an interpreter. . . .

Eventually he concluded:

Far from being thankful to the media for having turned her into a box-office draw, Phoolan believed that press reports giving her exploits in hard detail were, to a large extent, responsible for making her life miserable. The Behmai carnage put her in the headlines two years ago. "Much of what they [newsmen] wrote about me is lies," she said. "They wrote that I ordered my men to rape women. They associated my name with crimes committed by others." For a moment she displayed ungovernable fury. "*Yeh paper-wallon ne meri aisi-ki-taisi kar dee.*" [These papermen have twisted me this way and that.] For an illiterate, she seemed

> highly familiar with the power of the press, and the familiarity had apparently bred contempt.

Once she was in prison, the press coverage Phoolan received was no better. In keeping with the "agreement" she was allowed to live in the male wing with members of her gang. In October 1989, more than six years later, this fact alone still caused controversy. A South Indian magazine, *The Week*, carried a story headed: "Phoolan Devi's Private Sorrows". The journalist, Ravindra Dubey, wrote under an insert headed "Sexcapades row".

> . . . This was probably the first instance in independent India of keeping females and males together in the same prison ward.
>
> Most visitors, mainly newsmen, were after Phoolan. This hurt Malkhan who had surrendered earlier. Soon he found his followers moving around the two female dacoits [the other being Munni, a member of Ghanshyam's gang]. Piqued over this, Malkhan conspired to create a rift between Phoolan and her paramour Man Singh. On July 12, 1983 Man Singh assaulted Phoolan and snatched all her money [a "domestic row", Phoolan told me, aggravated by tension and insecurity]. . . . Finally jail officials brought the situation under control and Phoolan was shifted.
>
> Phoolan then sent word to her political friends and came back to the male wing on June 30, 1983. By then she had understood Malkhan's designs and began making overtures to the young men in Malkhan's gang. This resulted in an open fight between Malkhan's and Phoolan's gangs on June 22, 1984. The jail staff had to put the siren on. Seven dacoits and six jail officials were seriously injured. Phoolan was again shifted to the female ward.

The writer of the article concludes: "But according to informed sources, even now both the female dacoits enter the male ward during night." Other journalists went further, speculating on what

happened "during the night". Dr Manoj Marthur, in the Bombay-based tabloid *Blitz* (26 March 1983) in an article headed "Phoolan Fouling Jail Peace" wrote:

> . . . The officers are helpless and have to concede her each and every demand, including her desire to have sex.
>
> Under the Jail Manual, male and female prisoners cannot be kept together, nor can they be in touch with each other. But Phoolan, who is a known nymphomaniac and has an insatiable urge for sex, insists that she be kept with her fellow dacoits. This has put the jail officials in a quandary . . .

Such were the reactions to her in the Indian press. Such is the judgement of men.

What Phoolan says in her diary about the day she surrendered to the Indian government, hounded by the press, is quite simple, without any trace of the venom she had provoked in others:

"Fear had made me ill. When I was ready, they pushed our gang forward and I found myself at the head of the line. I asked what I was supposed to do and was told by an unknown officer that the Superintendent of Police would tell me what to do. I was pushed on to the stage and the S P pointed to the Chief Minister, gesturing that I should surrender my rifle to him. After that, I just did what I was supposed to do. The whole world seemed to be gathered there and I couldn't understand why."

24

Jail

ACCORDING TO THE "agreement", verbal assurances given to her at the time of her surrender, Phoolan Devi expected to be released after serving eight years in custody. But 12 February 1991 came and went and she found herself in Gwalior Central Jail, hidden from the public eye, feeling increasingly desperate, still fighting against her extradition to Uttar Pradesh. The rest of the dacoits in the Special Unit, including Man Singh and other members of her gang, also Malkhan Singh and his men, had succumbed to the pressures and advice of the Madhya Pradesh authorities, who had finally managed to persuade them that their acceptance of a "voluntary transfer" was the only way to speed up the legal process and satisfy the civil authorities. One by one they agreed and were transported across the border to Uttar Pradesh. Phoolan Devi found herself isolated in her resistance to the move. She wrote to me during this time, expressing her despair, asking my opinion. "Even Man Singh has left," she said. "I felt so angry, I did not even see him to say goodbye. I asked to remain in my cell." I wrote back, giving her my opinion for what it was worth. In her reply to my letter she said:

"I am so relieved that you support my instinct. Nobody else does. Even my family have become uncertain and give me all sorts of conflicting advice, adding to my state of confusion. All I know, Didi [Sister], is this: I do not trust the UP police or the government there. It would be so easy for them to get rid of me, declare me dead one day, wouldn't it? Station-wallah Bhai Sahib (a reference to a man who runs a teashop outside Gwalior's railway station and visits her from time to time) told me the other day that the paper-wallahs are

saying I have become suicidal. I rely on you, Didi, to tell the world that if they hear Phoolan Devi has taken her own life, it will be a lie. Tell them, Didi, that I have never been a coward. I have thought of death many times; I have wanted to die many times; but my life is in the hands of Durga Mata and, whatever happens, I will not play with my own destiny."

India has witnessed much political upheaval since Phoolan Devi surrendered in 1983. Governments have changed and been toppled. Indira Gandhi, who had negotiated with her through Rajendra Chaturvedi, died in November 1984, the victim of an assassin's bullets fired at close range by a member of her own security guard. Her death caused chaos and bloodshed throughout the country but particularly in Delhi, where sections of the Hindu population went on the rampage, wreaking vengeance on the Sikh community of the city. I was in Delhi at the time and heard grotesque stories of retribution on a mass scale; of innocent people subjected to violence, torture and death at the hand of hysterical mobs who roamed the streets, burning people dead and alive, defying all logic, reason and authority. Members of the police force and certain politicians were accused of collaborating with the mob. Mrs Gandhi's assassin had been a Sikh, whom she had refused to sack or shift, despite warnings from her inner circle of political advisers. She wanted to demonstrate her belief in a secular society. The British equivalent would have been to have Catholics from Northern Ireland recruited to protect Mrs Thatcher in Downing Street. History has shown that Mrs Gandhi and Mrs Thatcher were not so similar after all. In relation to Phoolan Devi, Chaturvedi told me, "Mrs Gandhi had tremendous sympathy for the downtrodden, particularly for village women whose lives had been shaped and corrupted by men."

So as not to appear sentimental in this respect, I must add that the Prime Minister was also under intense political pressure at the time. Only a month before Phoolan Devi surrendered, Girilal Jain, then editor of the *Times of India*, wrote a lengthy article in two parts, which appeared on the editorial page under the heading: "Mrs Gandhi's Last Chance – Search for a moral order". He referred

to her son Sanjay, who was viewed nationally as the bullyboy of Indian politics, encouraged in his ways by his mother:

> . . . She violated two other codes when she allowed her son, Sanjay Gandhi, to get into the automobile business and do so principally on the strength of state patronage which was available to him by virtue of her being Prime Minister. More accurately, she had only acquiesced in Sanjay's activities. For Sanjay was too wilful a young man to be too easily controlled. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that she tried to dissuade him from pursuing the Maruti project but failed. This was, however, not publicly known. Even otherwise, the people would hold her responsible for this breach of the other code – the use of official machinery for private gains.
>
> The issue was *not* whether it was intrinsically wrong for the ruler's son to go into business and/or whether the kind of patronage available to him was not in fact available to many others with political clout and/or money. The issue was whether Sanjay Gandhi's activities conformed to the people's stereotype of the Prime Minister's son or they violated it. Without doubt, they violated it. Members of the ruling order were not supposed to hanker after money. Two traditions – the Kshatriya and the Brahmin – met in Nehru just as they had met in Emperor Ashoka and Janak, Sita's father in *The Ramayana*. Nehru's daughter and grandchildren were expected to be loyal to this system's Brahminical and Kshatriya tradition. So it was bad enough that Sanjay took to big business; it was worse that he used state machinery; and it was an unmitigated disaster for Mrs Gandhi that he failed to make the car. The violation of the code is all the more reprehensible if it does not produce material success as well; crime without profit is unforgivable.

Such comments from senior editors did not assist Mrs Gandhi's increasingly vulnerable position. She needed to create a diversion,

so it would be wrong to conclude that her motives were altogether altruistic when she spoke to Chaturvedi.

Many years later, after Man Singh's departure from Gwalior, Phoolan Devi faced further sorrow. Her relationship with her mother and brother was fractured over many domestic matters that escalated to the point where she refused to see either of them. Her sisters Rukhmini and Bhoori were her only allies. Munni, her youngest and favourite sister, shocked her by taking sides against her. Phoolan's explanation is that Munni had fallen in love with a friend of Shiv Narain's and therefore wanted to remain close to her brother. Moola had never made any secret of the fact that among all her children her son came first. Apparently Shiv Narain had aggravated the situation by selling the plot of land allocated to Phoolan Devi at the time of her surrender and had bought himself a motorcycle with the proceeds.

Then, in the summer of 1989, Bhoori died in mysterious circumstances. She was discovered soaked in kerosene and severely burnt, whether by her own hand or another no one will ever be sure. She was rushed to hospital but died before she could make a statement, according to Rukhmini. Police records say it was suicide, but the reasons for such a suicide are equally mysterious since, like Rukhmini, she loved her husband and had come to Gwalior in order to give Phoolan moral support, with every intention of returning to her husband. Soon after this, Devidin died, his case over the land dispute with Maiyadin still unresolved. Because of her quarrel with her mother and brother, Phoolan Devi was not informed of the event until after the funeral.

By mid 1990, V. P. Singh was Prime Minister of India and the Thakurs of Uttar Pradesh, it appears, gained a new sense of confidence. I arrived in Gwalior in June that year and went to see Rukhmini at the police flats, where she lived in two rooms with her three children, next door to her brother, who had by then married a city-educated young woman called Shoba. I knew of the enmity within the family so did not knock on his door. I was let into Rukhmini's rooms by her daughter Usha, who sent her younger brother, Santosh, to call their mother from a neighbour's flat.

"Mausi, [Aunty] terrible things have happened," the little girl told me. "Mummy will explain."

Rukhmini arrived within a few minutes, embraced me as she entered the room and burst into tears. "The Thakurs are going to kill us all," she said. Apparently, a family who lived upstairs had "high-caste connections in UP" and had their eye on the ground-floor accommodation that she and Shiv Narain occupied. Her brother had at first been taunted and threatened, she told me, words of banter and bravado they had thought. Throwaway remarks such as, "Your sister is a Sudra whore in jail. What can you do now that Raja Sahib [V. P. Singh] is in power?" Words to this effect, to which Shiv Narain had retorted one day, "We've seen many Thakurs come and go!" In the magazine *The Week* (October 1989) he is reported as saying: "I am the brother of the same sister who killed twenty-one Thakurs in one go." Then late one evening, just a few days before I had arrived in Gwalior, ignorant of these developments, four Thakur men armed with knives had burst into Shiv Narain's flat, threatening to kill him, his wife and their baby. In a panic Shiv Narain had grabbed his rifle and fired shots into the air. The assailants fled and so did he after a quick consultation with the family, instructing his wife and sister to lock the doors and windows. The women lived in terror for the next few days. Shiv Narain did not return and they had no idea what he had decided to do or what had happened to him. They had speculated about many eventualities. People might have been lying in wait for him on the main road they had thought. The sound of gunfire had shocked the neighbourhood and the children said people started saying Shiv Narain was just like his sister and had "taken to the ravines".

As it turned out, Shiv Narain had caught a bus to his mother's village, where he was advised by his maternal uncle to return to Gwalior and report the matter to the police before the situation got out of hand. He did just that and was promptly arrested, charged with attempted murder, and found himself in the male wing of Gwalior Central Jail. In jail, he was attacked by other male prisoners, probably because he was a policeman and all prisoners hate the police force. The complexity of his particular situation

was obviously difficult for them to understand or comprehend. When Phoolan Devi found out about her brother's arrest and heard of the assaults on him, she forgot the family feud and, according to a jail warden I spoke to, created hangaama [a riot] within the prison, demanding his transfer to the Special Unit. Apparently, this was achieved within a few days and Phoolan asked to see her brother whom she had not met or communicated with for several months. She had publicly accused both him and her mother of having a hand in her sister's death.

While Rukhmini was telling me about these events, her son rushed forward and slammed the door shut, saying in the heightened whisper of a child, "They're outside, Mausi, looking at you!" Not wanting to appear afraid, I went and opened the door to look outside. Sure enough, three men were climbing the stairs, staring at me in silence. I shut the door once more, quite shaken.

"Are those the men?" I asked Rukhmini. She nodded and began speaking in a whisper, telling me not to come to the flats any more. They would come and see me in the hotel instead. I accepted her advice, feeling the tension of the situation.

Soon after I left Gwalior, I received a letter from Phoolan Devi, dated 29 June 1990, which read:

"Dearest, most respected Didi, I touch your feet and hope this letter finds you and your family well. Since my brother's arrest I have felt no peace. I don't feel like eating or drinking and I feel so much anxiety in my heart that I just cry night and day. Sometimes I think that I should do something to myself to find relief from this pain but, as you know, these thoughts come and go. Didi, ever since I came into this world I have seen only sorrow and grief – maybe there is no happiness in my fate. Maybe I shall always suffer. You will have to help me before you go home because I need it badly. You know this woman, Kaushaliya, who got Thakurs to beat up my brother, is not alone. She has the backing of many police officers here and the city goondas [hoodlums] as well. Didi, there is not one officer here who is willing to listen to me. All of them 'warn' me. Didi, you must talk to the Collector Sahib, and the Inspector-General of Police and to the Superintendent of Police.

You must tell them that since the new government came to power, I have not been given any kind of hearing. Nobody is willing to listen to me. . . .

"Didi, today I met Shiv Narain and told him you had come to Gwalior. He was so happy but then he started weeping, saying you should not have left without seeing him. Then he got into a panic and said you must meet his lawyer and arrange bail for him as soon as possible. He is innocent. He was attacked by four men, Thakurs, because of me. You must help him.

"I am terrified that I will be sent to Uttar Pradesh. If I was outside today, I would cling to you. I would hold you tight. I feel so uncertain. I know that society will never look upon me with any respect or understanding. Maybe it would have been better to die like a dog in the ravines than to fester in this hole like a rat.

"How will you come and see me? Please try. I feel so cornered and worried. I must see you. I send my namaste to you and all your friends. All my love to the children. Your sister, Phoolan Devi."

I knew I would not get permission to see her or Shiv Narain so I wrote back explaining that I too was powerless in the face of these events. I said all I could do was speak to a journalist friend of mine on the Jail Committee, who would try and alert the authorities concerned against any further attacks on her family.

Some months later, Shiv Narain was released on bail and rehoused with his family. Rukhmini chose to stay where she was because of her proximity to the jail. She still visits Phoolan every day in order to take her the meal she cooks on her wood fire.

In November 1990, V. P. Singh's government collapsed, having lost a vote of no confidence in the Lok Sabha. Ironically, his political demise was the result of his stand on the caste issue. Having represented the higher castes throughout his career, he decided to project a more popular image by championing the cause of the lowest caste, the Harijans [Untouchables], by introducing a "quota system" whereby they would be allocated jobs in the public sector. The move resulted in a public outcry, with students burning

themselves to death in the streets of Delhi by way of protest, much in the same way Buddhist monks had set fire to themselves during the Vietnam War. Their reasons: a quota system would result in further corruption; a select few from this caste would be given jobs, regardless of their ability; the vast majority of the poor and underprivileged would remain unaffected. The students of India saw it as a cynical political ploy, a vote-catching gimmick which undermined all those who struggled through exams, studying in ghettos, under street lights, in order to gain educational qualifications. Their outrage was further enhanced by the fact that, despite V. P. Singh's stated intentions, he held power because of his alliance with the extreme right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), whose entire political thrust was based on religious chauvinism and fundamental Hindu beliefs that, in fact, not only supported but propagated all the injustices of the caste system. The political contradictions of the Prime Minister's stance were obvious.

Encouraged by the students' protests against V. P. Singh's policies, the BJP interpreted the mood to indicate a middle-class backlash against "minorities", those at the bottom of the caste and class ladder. Emboldened by this assessment of the situation, they launched an attack on the Muslim population within a month, and announced that the Babri Masjid, a sixteenth-century mosque in the town of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, had to be reclaimed by Hindus as it was the birthplace of Rama, god-king of *The Ramayana*, one of the two central epics of the Hindu religion.

The mosque had to be demolished, they said, and a temple erected in its place. Much to V. P. Singh's dismay, his newly found allies asserted their power in defiance of his authority and proceeded to rally fundamentalists throughout the country. On 30 October 1990, a vast Hindu mob, under the leadership of the BJP, descended on the town of Ayodhya, determined to destroy the mosque. What followed is the most violent chapter of Indian history since the partition of the country in 1947, under British rule. I was in London at the time trying to finish this book.

The *Guardian* devoted the cover story of its weekend supple-

ment to the issue some weeks later (15–16 December 1990). Their correspondent in Delhi, Derek Brown, wrote:

> After prolonged dithering and delay, the real storm broke on October 30 this year, when the *kar sevaks* [active saviours] came to Ayodhya.
>
> The state chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mulayam Singh Yadav, had ordered the police to protect the mosque by all means. But at the first determined rush of frenzied pilgrims, the police stepped aside. Saffron flags were planted on the mosque's three domes, and bricks were tugged from the 460-year-old walls before a bloody kind of order was restored by police and paramilitary firing into the mob.
>
> All across India, Hindus heard of the "victory" from the BBC (the national TV and radio, as usual, repeated Government lies). Celebrations turned into demonstrations, demonstrations turned into riots, and riots turned into communal clashes, with the police, typically, siding blatantly with the Hindu mobs.
>
> For days on end, starting just before the descent on Ayodhya, front pages carried grisly accounts of murder and mayhem across north India, and in substantial pockets of the south. Rows of houses were put to the torch, dead or half dead bodies were hurled into the flames, whole towns were hastily placed under curfew.
>
> The politicians, naturally, scrabbled round in the mess, seeking advantages for themselves. The BJP leader, Lal Krishan Advani, who had fuelled the Ayodhya frenzy by leading a Rath Yatra, or pilgrimage, there himself (he was arrested and placed under comfortable detention during the real trouble) blandly blamed the government of Vishwanath Pratap Singh for provoking the Hindus.
>
> Singh, who had a canny eye on the drifting Muslim vote bank, had already lost the parliamentary support of the BJP, and knew his government was doomed. On November 7, he duly lost a confidence vote, his premiership, and

> more than a third of his Janata Dal party. The defectors, under the veteran also-ran of Indian politics, Chandra Shekhar, now form a ludicrously small minority government, with the far-from-altruistic support of Rajiv Gandhi.

In the midst of this chaos, with the state of Uttar Pradesh on the fragile edge of a communal and caste war which threatens to tear the country apart, Phoolan Devi awaits her fate in Gwalior Central Jail. The issues surrounding her case lie almost buried under the debris of political events, fluctuating politicians and a string of officials who come and go, motivated by their own ambitions. Confused by all that surrounds her, she finds it difficult to understand how "such big people", Prime Ministers and Chief Ministers, do not "keep their word". In her world of baghi folklore and culture, an assurance once given is never retracted; to "keep your word" is a question of personal honour. I am aware that governments, world wide, have no such sense of honour, no such tradition, and I find myself struggling to explain this reality every time I sit down to answer her letters.

Sleeman wrote two volumes entitled *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*. In the second volume, in a chapter headed "Veracity", he writes:

> I have known the man among the Gonds of the woods of Central India, whom nothing could induce to tell a lie, join a party of robbers to lift a herd of cattle from the neighbouring plains for nothing more than as much spirits as he could enjoy at one bout. I asked a native gentleman of the plains, in the valley of the Nerbudda one day, what made the people of the woods to the north and south more disposed to speak the truth than those more civilized of the valley itself. "They have not yet learned the value of a lie," he said, with the greatest simplicity and sincerity, for he was a very honest and plain-spoken man.
>
> Veracity is found to prevail most where there is least to tempt to falsehood, and most to be feared from it. In a rude state of society, like that of which I have been speaking, the

only shape in which property is accumulated is in cattle; things are bartered for each other without the use of a circulating medium; and one member of a community has no means of concealing from the other the articles of property he has. If they were to steal from each other, they would not be able to conceal what they stole – to steal, therefore, would be no advantage. In such societies every little community is left to govern itself; to secure the rights, and enforce the duties, of all its several members in their relations with each other; they are too poor to pay taxes to keep up expensive establishments, and their governments seldom maintain among them any for the administration of justice, or the protection of life, property, or character.

Further on in the same chapter, based on his experience as District Magistrate, he says:

> . . . The prisoner knows that his neighbours expect him to tell the truth to save them trouble, and will detest him if he does not: he supposes that we shall have the sense to find out the truth whether he tells it or not, and then humanity to visit his crime with the punishment it merits, and no more.
>
> The magistrate asks the prisoner what made him steal; and the prisoner enters at once into an explanation of the circumstances which reduced him to the necessity of doing so, and offers to bring witnesses to prove them; but never dreams of offering to bring witnesses to prove that *he did not steal*, if he really has done so – because the general feeling would be in favour of his doing the one, and against his doing the other.

The accuracy of Sleeman's observations was brought home to me when I visited the village in which Phoolan Devi had been born, accompanied by her mother Moola, Shiv Narain and Rukhmini in 1988. I was introduced to the village "Mad Woman" who had defended Phoolan against forms of prejudice she had endured herself. At first she looked blank when I spoke of Phoolan Devi.

Then I mentioned the Behmai massacre which had made Phoolan a household name in the village.

Instantly she laughed and said, "My little Phoolan! God bless her!" Ignoring my reference to Behmai, she asked, "Has she still got that cow her no-good husband gave her? I remember they took it away."

I laughed while Rukhmini told her it was safe in Gwalior and had recently given birth to a calf. Trying to draw on her impressions, I asked if she had seen Maiyadin recently.

She spat in the sand and said, "He is the *first* one she should have killed. Yes, he's still around, behaving like a bitch on heat chasing Thakurs!" She asked me how we had reached the village and I told her the jeep was waiting for us some six or eight kilometres away. I explained that we had walked from there because the driver had said the road was too rough for him to drive any further. Greatly excited, she asked if she could accompany us back in order to take a ride. She had never sat in any kind of vehicle before. I tried to dissuade her, saying our plans were uncertain and that the jeep was full. Rukhmini nudged me and said, "She's been alone all her life. Why not? We can manage." I asked how she would get back to the village. She pointed to the river and said, "I can swim – better than Phoolan!"

Later that night, we went to the village of Teoga, Ramkali's village, downstream across the river. I was introduced to an elderly widow whose nephew owned a cloth shop in Kalpi and was a song writer. She told me he had written a song about Phoolan and other baghis and had been arrested at one of his concerts for romanticizing "badmaashs" ("anti-social elements" according to newspaper reporters in India). I asked if we could send him a message in order to have a concert in the village, offering to send the jeep and the driver to pick him up. She said that would make him suspicious and sent her grandson instead on a bicycle.

Much to our disbelief and amazement, he turned up around eleven o'clock that night, accompanied by three musicians, all of them and their equipment on bicycles. His aunt sent messengers,

mostly small children, through the village saying the concert would begin at midnight outside Ramkali's home.

While the family rushed around making various arrangements, bringing extra bucketloads of water from the well; sweeping their courtyard; I spoke to the musician-composer, who was called Devi Gulam. (He had once helped Moola find a lawyer when Phoolan was first victimized by the police.) I asked him about his name, saying it was an unusual combination – "Devi" in Hindu means goddess and "Gulam" in Urdu means slave – appearing to be a mixture of male and female, Hindu and Muslim connotations. He shrugged his shoulders humorously and said, "That's what my mother called me. According to the Hindu scriptures we are all half-man and half-woman; according to present trends, Muslims have been enslaved by Hindus. Anyway, I did not choose my name, it was my mother's way of thinking and she's now dead." As he spoke, in a somewhat distracted manner, he was busy concentrating on what he was doing. He was incredibly meticulous and professional in his manner, setting up microphones that came out of a dusty old suitcase, laying out straw mats for the musicians to sit on, practising chords, tuning tribal drums and a harmonium.

By midnight, almost three hundred people had gathered. They sat on the walls and steps of the hut and spread into the alleyways beyond. A loudhailer was brought and the musician began to announce the concert, calling out to the whole village, saying he was singing songs of history, songs about baghis. I was given permission to record the concert on my Walkman which was all I had by way of technology. The concert lasted some three hours and there was much coming and going. Quite spontaneously, a group of women collected close to the singers, providing a chorus. Devi Gulam responded by teaching them the words and instructing them when to join in. It was all highly organized in the midst of what seemed to be utter chaos.

The song about Phoolan Devi was half-written and the singer improvised as he went along, interrupting the melody to check facts with me and members of the family who sat nearby. It does not translate well without the music and the chorus of women, but here are a few lines which may give some idea of its spirit:

बेहमई काण्ड

बन मा के फुलन जिस दम सफा हे चली
विक्रम का बदला लेने तैयार हो चली
वो लालसा के चली और तपफल डाल के चली।

विक्रम के माने के बाद फुलन बेहमई में आई
गांव बेहमई के लोगों बोली बचन दुखदाई।

गुस्से की ज्वाला में वो मन मा के चली!

जाल के मुखीम अली ने उसने लिपौटसाद
उसने बेहमई गांव को अपना सल बनाओ साथ
बाना के सीने में पिस्टल लटका ली चली;
उसकी सेना पिस्टल में हथियार ली चली!

जाकर गांव बेहमई में पिस्टल ठाकुर ललकारे!
लिया बदला कोई न जाना सभी लौट को आये!
फुलन के दिल में गुस्से की ज्वाला हो चली;
बदले की ज्वाला संवो फुफकारा के चली!

बोली वो लालसा के कुछ दो ध्यान तुम्हारा आया।
भाग न जाना कोई न हंस के कहती सबको समझाया।
इतने में गोलियों की हो बौछार छोड़ चली
लाशों के ऊपर लाशों की कतार हो लगी।

Phoolan was the one to lead us
When the chieftain Vikram died,
Phoolan took the road to leadership
After Vikram died,
With her rifle by her side.

Then she went to see Mustaqeem
Told the Baba all her woes
Asked Mustaqeem for assistance
In the battle with her foes.

[*Chorus*]
She was walking tall,
Taunting them all,
Answering the call
After Vikram died,
With her rifle by her side.

Then she went to doomed Behmai
And sent for the enemy Thakur clan.
Though none can say how or why,
People gathered, as if by plan.

[*Chorus*]

Phoolan's pain, who can understand it,
Revenge that boiled up in her heart
And made her walk the ways of a bandit?
Soon the shooting would have to start.

[*Chorus*]

In Behmai the bullets were flying,
Bodies were dropping one by one.
She left her enemies dead or dying,
Walked off tall, her vengeance done.

[*Chorus*]

Throughout the concert, villagers came forward and placed money in a bowl that had been placed before the musicians; small amounts, loose change and rupee notes. It was the tradition; an unasked-for but accepted fee for the travelling troupe. We contributed larger amounts in a similar manner and got the same ceremonial response as those who had given aluminium coins.

Back in Gwalior a few days later, we sat and listened to the tape in my hotel room. Shiv Narain, who had the best musical ability in the family, transcribed the words and practised to the accompaniment of brass ashtrays and drum beats on a table, much to everyone's amusement. He said he would visit Phoolan in prison the next morning, with Moola and Rukhmini, to sing her the song. I offered him my Walkman and the tape but he said it was likely to be confiscated. Phoolan, he said, would have to listen to it without the music.

Afterword

In February 1993, ten years after she and her gang of seven men laid down their weapons, Phoolan Devi found herself virtually isolated in a single cell in Gwalior Central Jail. All the men had been released in accordance with the verbal agreement they had collectively negotiated. The Special Unit of the prison, where she had lived with Man Singh and other members of her gang, was now occupied by others with political clout of one sort or another. They had also inherited the vegetable garden she had so painstakingly cultivated over the years in order to supplement the daily prison diet of dal and rice and to pass time. She had become the last captive of that era of rural banditry. A prisoner to whom neither legal nor constitutional rules seemed to apply; a woman to whom the press no longer had any access as a result of red-tape designed to deter the most determined of journalists.

The country had itself undergone violent change following the gruesome and senseless assassination of Rajiv Gandhi on the night of 21 May 1991 in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. In the aftermath of his death, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a hegemonic group who seek Hindu supremacy in the country, had swept to power in both Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, challenging the very foundations of secular democracy.

Against this backdrop, Phoolan was locked in a tortuous battle with the Indian courts in a bid to gain the freedom she had been promised in 1983. As she puts it: "*Meri bilkul kuch sunahi nahin ho rahi hai.*" ["Absolutely no one hears my case"]. In March 1992 she submitted a petition through the jail authorities to the Supreme Court in Delhi. The bench of judges refused to hear it, saying they

did not understand Hindi – despite the fact that Hindi is claimed to be the national language by government decree. The petition, they ruled, should have been submitted in English, and the case was adjourned, with no fixed date for the next hearing.

"*Bahana !*" ["Excuses !"] was Phoolan's response.

In Delhi I met Phoolan's lawyer, Kamini Jaiswal, a gentle feminist and an advocate of the the Supreme Court who had in the past represented the victims of the Bhopal gas disaster. She told me that the petition submitted in March had been an appeal against extradition to Uttar Pradesh, where Phoolan believed she would be executed or assassinated. She said she had decided to amend the petition, appealing for Phoolan's release and the quashing of all charges on the grounds that all her compatriots had been freed and that a verbal agreement existed for her to be released after eight years, as had happened with other dacoit gangs in the past. The case was listed for hearing on October 12, then relisted for November 5 but, for "technical and legal reasons", the amended petition was not heard. Instead the judges considered the earlier petition, which had by that stage been translated into English. They ruled that Phoolan should not be sent to Uttar Pradesh and that she should remain in Gwalior until the central and state governments responded to her petition in writing.

I decided to go to Gwalior in order to explain the situation to Phoolan, who had not been present in court. I began to communicate with her through her sister, Rukhmini, and the first note I received from her read:

> You ask how I am. I walk and talk in my sleep. I cannot eat. What more is there to say? The paperwallahs continue to write lies about me. There is an article in the Hindi press which says I am so depressed that I am ready to kill myself. I have not said that to any reporter. Please remember, *didi*, if I die in prison it will not be by my own hand. You must tell the whole world that.

She also informed me that Man Singh was living like a fugitive, unable to sleep two nights in the same village or town, except

Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, which offered the anonymity of a sprawling industrial metropolis. A member of their gang had been killed three days after his release from a UP jail. His body had been discovered riddled with bullets in a field on the outskirts of his ancestral village. He had been working on the land allocated to him by the government in accordance with the verbal agreement of 1982–83. She asked me if I could somehow arrange for Man Singh to get a gun licence for self-protection. "If he has a licence, he can come to Gwalior to see me. All Malkhan Singh's men are armed."

I explained to Rukhmini that getting a gun licence was not within my power but that I would go and see Malkhan Singh in order to ascertain how he had got his. If it was within Rajendra Chaturvedi's power, who was posted in Bhopal at the time. I said I could perhaps explain the situation to him. Rukhmini looked extremely apprehensive and warned me of Malkhan's hostility to Phoolan. She wondered if it would be safe to visit him and stressed that he would not, in any case, give me any information that might assist Phoolan or Man Singh. I said I wanted to interview him about his involvement with the BJP as I had read a recent article in the Bombay based *Sunday Observer* which claimed that he had delivered block votes to the party during local elections, after his release from prison. The article had criticised the "strong-arm tactics" used to win such seats.

Malkhan Singh's home in Gwalior turned out to be a Thakur-style house, built in brick and cement with a steel door. Dogs barked as I approached, but his wife, whom I had met before, invited me in saying her husband was expected soon. She offered me a cup of tea and while I waited I couldn't help looking into the open door of their bedroom. An enormous poster depicting a popular Hindi filmstar adorned the wall above the velvet-covered double bed. The man in the poster had a knife between his teeth and a rifle on his shoulder as he appeared to leap into eternity. Over the entrance to the room was a portrait of Mahatma Ghandi, garlanded with a string of roses crafted from sandalwood. Above it, a BJP slogan that proclaimed "*Hindustan*

Hamari Hai" ["The land of Hindus is ours"]. What struck me was the contradiction between all these images.

When Malkhan Singh arrived a little later, rifle slung over his shoulder, accompanied by a young man carrying a ·303, his wife became silent and demure, attentive to his every need. She held him in awe. So did the young man, who was apparently his bodyguard. Malkhan ordered some more tea and greeted me with the ritual of politeness, aware of my connection with Phoolan Devi and her family. I explained that I had come in the hope of interviewing him for an article I was planning to write.

"I know you do not think much of Phoolan Devi," I said, "and this visit does not concern her. Just a question and answer session – on tape if you wish. I will be fair to you."

"What about?" he asked.

"Your involvement with the BJP and what you think the solution is to the problem in Ayodhya," I replied.

He thought for a while, pacing the room, flinging his rifle on the bed and said, "Ayodhya? There is no problem in Ayodhya." I said that, in my view, it was an issue that was tearing the country apart and had already resulted in many deaths. He stated again with great authority, staring at me hard, "*Hamari mandir banegi. Ayodhya mai kuch bhi problem nahi hai.*" ["Our temple will be built. There is no problem in Ayodhya"]

"But what about the mosque?" I asked.

"There *is* no mosque" he retorted. An ominous statement as, at the time, the mosque still stood. A few months later it was razed to the ground by a frenzied mob of Hindu zealots two hundred thousand strong, yet another bloody chapter in the country's history.

When I was leaving, after his refusal to allow me to tape an interview, he said laughingly, "You can write anything you like about Phoolan Devi! Do not connect my name with hers. She is not a true baghi [rebel]. All she's ever done is chase one man after the next!"

"Including yourself?" I asked jokingly.

"She cannot even come before me," he snapped, pointing to the

ground at his feet. "I know all about the ravines and the baghis. What do you understand except Bombay and France?"

"France?" It was my turn to laugh. "I know next to nothing about France." Glancing at the Rambo-style poster above the bed I realised that his opinion of me had been shaped by celluloid. The fact that I had been smoking a cigarette when he arrived had not helped.

The next day I wrote to Phoolan, saying, "Malkhan dislikes you immensely. He used the word *nafrath* [hate] in relation to you and said something about how you had already brought 'bad luck' to Vikram Mallah and Baba Mustaqueem. Until Man Singh gets his licence, tell him not to come to Gwalior." In response, she sent me a wild flower from the wall outside her cell and a message through Rukhmini that I should try and meet Man Singh before leaving. There were some "safe" houses on the outskirts of town, she said, that her brother would know.

When I managed eventually to meet Man Singh, his long tangled hair that had hung below his shoulders was now short and streaked with grey. The wild look in his eyes had mellowed and he spoke in a quiet, thoughtful manner, absorbed in his own struggle for survival. He lived in constant fear of reprisal. He said of his time in Orai Jail, Uttar Pradesh: "They treated me like a dog. I was chained hand and foot for months on end. I couldn't stand sit or sleep straight. All my bones ached and my mind was almost always on the brink of madness. I cannot really describe the feeling. You have to live it to know it." I asked him why he had accepted his extradition and he said, "The authorities put much pressure on us. They promised us freedom but said that the Uttar Pradesh government had to be satisfied first. I was sick of living behind those walls. I was prepared to die so I took a chance." I asked if he thought Phoolan should take the same chance. No, absolutely not. With her it is different – especially now. The thakurs of UP are very strong and in a violent mood these days! They also have many contacts within the police force." When I asked him how he saw his own future he shrugged and said, "I don't know. Times are bad. I try to live from one day to the next as best as I can."

"How would a gun licence help?" I asked.

For the first time he laughed and said, "Anybody would think twice before approaching me if they knew I had a rifle by my side!"

Back in Delhi, Kamini told me that she had submitted the amended petition and requested that the court hear it as a matter of urgency. The Madhya Pradesh government had replied to Phoolan's earlier petition by stating that her continued detention in Gwalior was technically illegal and unconstitutional; that she remained in their custody under "special instructions" from Delhi and that there were no charges pending against her in their state. The Uttar Pradesh government responded by issuing a fresh writ petition demanding her extradition on charges of murder. The central government had yet to reply.

Phoolan remains in an extremely vulnerable position. Whatever the outcome, the volatile nature of Indian politics means that her prospects are grim. If she is extradited to Uttar Pradesh, she believes she will be hanged; even if released, she will live as a fugitive. More likely, the central government will stall and she will remain in jail for as long as they hold on to power. Just how long the Congress (I) can avoid another general election is also debatable and many political pundits predict that the next time around the Bharatiya Janata Party, with the support of Hindu fanatics and large sections of the Indian middle class, are likely to sweep the polls.

In 1992 I stumbled upon another shocking aspect of Phoolan's story. One day she had been rushed to hospital, bleeding heavily from an ovarian cyst. Her womb was removed. I asked the female prison doctor why this had been necessary. Suppressing her laughter, she replied: "We don't want Phoolan Devi breeding more Phoolan Devis – or Phoolan Devi's *son* for that matter." At first, I did not tell Phoolan what I had learnt, not wanting to make her more distraught than she already was. Later, when she had realised herself what had happened, I asked if I could make known what had happened and she said: "What difference does it make? They have already done everything possible they could have done to me. It would have been better to die like a dog in the ravines than to live like a rat in this hole, as I have said many times before."

Phoolan's notoriety lives on as distorted myth in the most unexpected places. Her name is included on a list of "Wild Women" on T-shirts that can be bought in London's Brixton market – alongside Marlene Dietrich, Mae West and Calamity Jane. The accompanying leaflet describes her as an "early 20th century highway robber of the rich in Madhya Pradesh". Phoolan herself feels she has been singled out. Her amnesty has been set aside, because she is a woman, because she is low caste, and because, when she was on the run she associated with a Muslim bandit leader. From the Hindu point of view, a woman of her status, born into a community of fishermen and abandoned by her husband, was meant to be submissive. Her defiance of the social order needed to be curbed. By any standards, she has most certainly paid an exorbitant price.

GLOSSARY

Ahir: milkman, caste of Sudras
Amma: mother
avtar: manifestation of
Baba, Babu: term of respect and spiritual endearment
badla: revenge
baghi: rebel
Baisakh: monsoon month
bajra: cheap millet-like grain
baraat: wedding party
behad: ravines
Beti: daughter
Bhaiya: brother
bidis: tobacco rolled in tobacco leaf
bigha: measurement of plot of land (3 = 1 acre)
Bitia: daughter
Brahma: God of creation
Brahmins: priests, the first in rank of four main castes of Hindu society
burqah: veil for Muslim women
Chait: spring month
chalan: fine
chamar: skin-curer
charpai: string bed
choola: stove
CM: Chief Minister
crore: 1.000,000
dacoit: armed bandit
dacoity: armed robbery
Daku: an outlaw
dal: lentils
daroga: police inspector
Dau: old and saintly man
dera: camp
dharma: duty
DIG: Deputy Inspector General
dupatta: a thin veil

Durga Mata: Goddess of the earth, Kali is one of her manifestations (also Bajrang Devi, Mahadevi, Sitla Mata)
faraar: to abscond or "take to the ravines"
gauna: agreement ensuring a period of time before child bride moves in with her husband
goondas: hoodlum
Gujars: a warrior caste
guru: a teacher or spiritual guide
Harijans: see *Untouchables*
hora: chickpeas
jai: "long live"
jawan: soldier
Jhansi ki Rani: Queen of Jhansi
Jiji: sister (in Bundelkhundi)
Kali: goddess of retribution and revenge
karma: fate
ki jai: a salutation, like "Long live . . ."
kos: a measure of distance (1 kos = 2 miles)
Kshatriyas: warriors, second of the four main Hindu castes (including Gujars and Thakurs)
Kurta-pajama: long loose garment like a shirt without a collar, worn over baggy trousers
lakh: 100,000
lassi: yoghurt drink
lathis: wooden sticks
lungi: piece of cloth wrapped round the body
Mallahs: caste of fishermen
masjid: mosque
Mastana: one who is at peace and has given up material ambition
Mayo Thakurs: high-caste Thakurs
MLA: Member of the Legislative Assembly
MP: Madhya Pradesh
mukhiya: headman
Mukya Mantri: chief minister
nallah: rivulet
namaste: gesture of respect, with hands joined
Nayan: barber
paan: leaf chewed with betel nut
PAC: Provincial Armed Constabulary
paisa: penny
pakars: kidnap victims
panchayat: elected council of a village
pandit: Brahmin learned in the Hindu religion, Hindu religious teacher
pradhan: village leader, probably Brahmin

GLOSSARY

puja: prayer, religious ritual
puri: deep-fried wholewheat puffed bread
RAC: Rajastan Armed Constabulary
roti: roasted wheat or bread
rupee: unit of Indian currency
sadhu: hermit
SAF: Special Armed Force
Sahib: Sir or Mr
sarpanch: headman of a village
Sawan: a monsoon season
Sawan Dui: festival in early July
Shiva: God of destruction
SP: Superintendent of Police
subedar: non-commissioned officer
Sudras: labourers, at bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy, but above the "untouchables"
tamasha: drama
tempo: three-wheeled scooter-rickshaw
Thakurs: feudal landowners, minor noblemen, a sub-caste of Kshatriyas
thana: police station or district
thanedar: officer in charge of a police station
Thuggee: an outlawed community
Thugs: outlaws, deceivers
TI: Thana Inspector
tikka: ash or a streak of colour across the forehead as a religious blessing
tilak: same as above
tola: a measure of weight, more or less equivalent to an ounce
tonga: horse-drawn carriage
Untouchables (or) Harijans: handlers of garbage and human waste, beneath the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system, but according to Gandhi "the children of God"
UP: Uttar Pradesh
Vaishyas: traders and merchants, third in rank in Hindu caste system, below Kshatriyas
Vishnu: god of preservation
wallah: of that trade
zamindars: landlords

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Mala Sen

'Mala Sen's vivid account of India's Bandit Queen not only documents the creation of an extraordinary female outlaw, it also highlights the failure of the legal system the world over to fully comprehend women offenders.'

Helena Kennedy, QC,
author of *Eve was Framed*

Born into poverty in Northern India Phoolan Devi has become one of the most famous bandits in India's history, a living legend revered by millions.

As a child in the Chambal Valley Phoolan felt so keenly the injustice of the caste system that she fought for her father's land rights, an unprecedented action for a woman. Her later refusal to tolerate an arranged marriage put her beyond the pale. As a punishment, Phoolan became the victim of a dacoit (bandit) kidnap - but the demands of survival meant that within a year she had assumed control of her own dacoit gang and become the region's most notorious bandit, responsible for robberies, hijacks, kidnaps and handouts.

In revenge for the murder of her lover - and her own rape -Phoolan is said to have been responsible for the murder of 22 highcaste Hindu men. She evaded capture for a year after the massacre, and her eventual surrender in 1983 was a negotiated act which took place before thousands of people.

Based on prison diaries, letters, family interviews, police records and eye witness accounts, this updated edition takes account of recent developments in Phoolan's story - as well as wider events in India's troubled democracy.

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